

PROSPECTS 2006

# NEWSBREAK

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## Moving On

Accelerating peace in Mindanao

### INSIDE

The MILF 20 Years After  
My Father, My Enemy

Bustling Cities

Kris, Brassware, and Baul

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# Mindanao Accelerating

WE CHOSE TO TIME OUR MINDANAO SPECIAL ISSUE FOR THIS SEASON, when we turn over a new leaf and welcome 2006. It's because there's a whiff of good news. We have something to look forward to in the New Year.

First, the peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) are on their final stretch and a final agreement is expected next year. While this is only the beginning of a process that will silence the guns, bring the rebels into the mainstream, and trigger enterprise and growth in former conflict areas, it's a significant first step.

The final compact, in a sense, will be like a living will. Both parties will allow for a multi-year transition period before the structures and processes intended to bring about the desired goals of equity and justice will work. What gives the two groups an advantage this time around is that they have the benefit of 20/20 hindsight. They have learned from the flaws of the agreement between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front sealed in 1996.

Second, the economy of most of the regions in Mindanao is perking up, with the poorest areas, namely the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao and Caraga, showing the highest growth in 2004. Sure, the rich areas (like Davao and Cagayan de Oro) continue to soar, leaving their poor neighbors behind, but the ARMM and Caraga are stirring, poised for take-off.

In this double issue, we also acknowledge the efforts of many countries (Malaysia, the US, Japan, the European Union, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom), NGOs, and individuals to help Mindanao become a better place. We celebrate Muslim art as well as children's books that teach tolerance.

Of course, we didn't miss out on the challenges, among them, accountability in the ARMM, anti-Muslim prejudice, and resolving problems of ancestral domain.

We thank the US Institute of Peace for their support for this special issue. They left editorial judgment to NEWSBREAK.

We invite you to join us in welcoming the New Year with high hopes for accelerating peace in Mindanao.



You can reach Marites Dañguilan Vitug at: [marites@newsbreak.com.ph](mailto:marites@newsbreak.com.ph).

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Essays may be in English or Filipino, maximum of 1,000 words. Please indicate your full name and contact details (address, telephone number, fax and e-mail) in a transmittal letter.

Entries will be evaluated based on the following criteria: depth of understanding, treatment of issue, and composition (flow, clarity, style).

Finalists will be notified by May 2006 and will be asked to join the Exhibit on May 26-27, 2006, at the SM Megatrade Hall, SM Megamall. Winners will be announced on May 27, 2006.

Winning entry in the English category will be published in NEWSBREAK Magazine. All finalist entries will be compiled in a *Panibagong Paraan* publication.

Please submit entries to:

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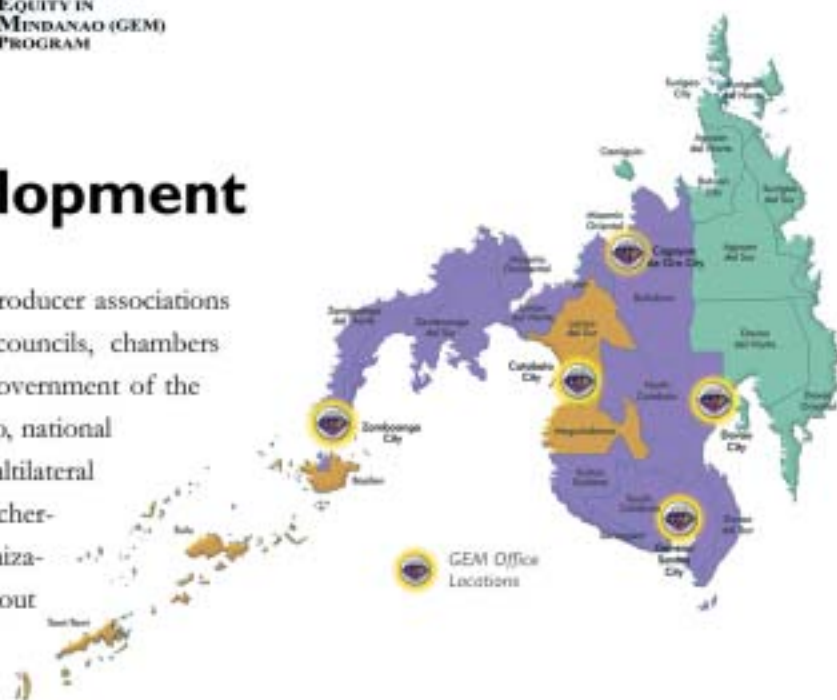
For information on project grant competition (deadline is Nov.30,2005), policy proposal, and photography competitions under Panibagong Paraan, please visit [www.panibagongparaan.com](http://www.panibagongparaan.com). or contact the Panibagong Paraan2006 secretariat at telephone (02) 917-3047 or (02) 637-5855 local 3407. E-mail: [dimp@worldbank.org](mailto:dimp@worldbank.org)





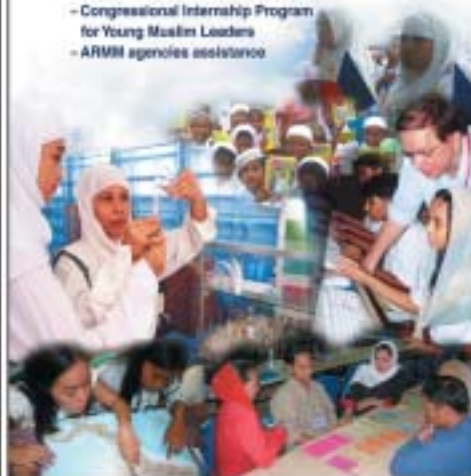
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The GEM Program works with producer associations and cooperatives, NGOs, business councils, chambers of commerce, local governments, the Government of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, national government line agencies, bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, private firms, Parent-Teacher-Community Associations and other organizations and individuals working to bring about equitably distributed economic growth and strengthened peace in Mindanao.



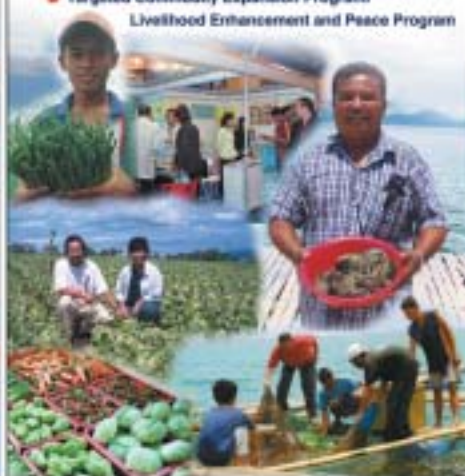
### Skills Development Effort for the Future Workforce

- Computer Literacy & Internet Connection (CLIC) Program
- Education Awareness & Support Effort (EASE) Matching Grant Program
- Governance
  - Congressional Internship Program for Young Muslim Leaders
  - ARMM agencies assistance



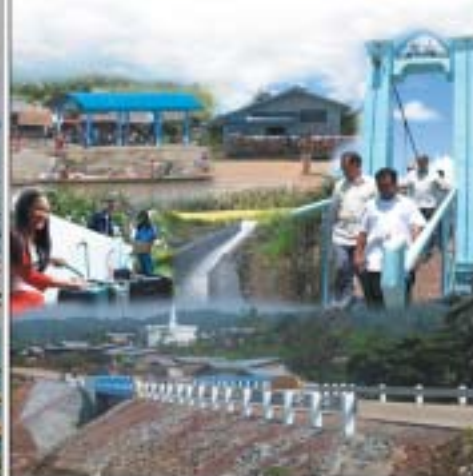
### Business Growth

- Business Support Organizations (BSO)
- Targeted Commodity Expansion Program (TCEP)
  - High-Value Horticulture
  - Export Promotion
  - Sustainable Aquaculture Fisheries Efforts
- Targeted Commodity Expansion Program/ Livelihood Enhancement and Peace Program



### Economic Development Infrastructure

- Community Infrastructure Program
- Mid-Scale Infrastructure Program



The implementing partner is the  
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A trader in the bustling city of Davao.

Cover photograph by LUIS LIWANAG

## ...And They Said

**"This battle [against radical Islam] is going to be won and lost in the Middle East. The US must be seen—if not to have prevailed or to have created a democratic Iraq—to at least to have denied the jihadists a victory. Because otherwise the consequences for America and for the world are horrendous."**

—Former Singapore Prime Minister **LEE KUAN YEW** in a recent interview in *Time*

**"The leader of a certain country is still worshipping war criminals. Surely this is wrong."**

—Chinese Foreign Minister **LI ZHAOXING**, explaining why his planned meeting with his Japanese counterpart at the sidelines of the Asean foreign ministers' meeting last December was canceled. He was referring to the visits Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to the Yasukuni Shrine.

**"If spying, like wire-tapping nonmilitary matters, is tolerated, the AFP can blackmail the President, legislators, the opposition, and everyone else."**

—Sen. **JOKER ARROYO** on the refusal of the Armed Forces to investigate allegations that its men had wiretapped the phone conversations of President Arroyo and former election official Virgilio Garcillano



## El Nido's Toothless Mosquitoes

ONCE AGAIN, LAST DECEMBER 2, the townsfolk of El Nido, Palawan paraded around the town garbed in gowns, capes, and sashes made out of mosquito nets. It was the Pista ng Kulambo, their annual celebration of their success in controlling the spread of malaria by promoting the use of bed nets, *kulambo*. It's become a tourist attraction as well.

El Nido is looking at better times. When the town had a malaria scare in the 1990s, third-term Mayor Edna Lim recalled, she would bow in shame during provincial government meetings when asked about the high incidence of malaria in her town. The trend continued until 2000 when El Nido registered the highest malaria incidence—1,219 cases. "When you said El Nido back then, people would only think of malaria," Lim said.

Very few knew about the natural grandeur of the small town's landscape and about the swiftlets, birds that abound in the islands of Bacuit Bay. These birds use their saliva to build nests, which are used as main ingredient in the famous Nido bird's nest soup.

Pista ng Kulambo was conceived in 1999 as part of the local government's strategy to campaign for the widespread use of the *kulambo* soaked in insecticide. At that time, a local survey found that only 34 percent of the house-

holds used mosquito nets to protect themselves from mosquito bites at night.

Malaria is endemic to Palawan and is one of the leading causes of deaths here. Visitors who do not take precautions pay a heavy price. Recently, TV reporter Reyster Langit and his cameraman died of malaria after a brief stay in another town in the province.

The *kulambo* strategy worked for El Nido. In 2003, its malaria cases were down to 373 cases of malaria and no reported death. Municipal health officer Cesar Rivera attributes their success to the cooperation of provincial and municipal leaders, and to the El Nido Foundation (ENF), an organization put up by private resort owners to carry out social programs.

While the municipality initiated the *kulambo* campaign, the foundation helped sustain it, Rivera said. Apart from the distribution of bed nets to families and impregnating the nets with insecticide, they trained people to detect malaria and treat it at its earliest stage. Rivera said the townsfolk are also encouraged to have their blood samples checked for malaria when they suffer from flu—one of the earliest malaria symptoms.

But El Nido and the rest of Palawan cannot be entirely free from malaria, Rivera said. The malaria-causing mosquitoes thrive in Palawan's vast forests. The use

of bed nets, he said, is the most effective way of controlling the disease because malaria-carrying mosquitoes are active only at night—about 8 p.m. to 4 a.m.

Pista ng Kulambo continues to be a colorful celebration in El Nido every December and has become a venue for disseminating information and strategies to residents. Once, Puerto Princesa City even "borrowed" the activity to celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> year of Kilusan Ligtas Malarya, the organization assigned to control malaria in the province.

Some people think that the celebration is "expensive" and a "waste of money," "but we really see the results," Lim said. The reputation of El Nido has changed dramatically. The second-class town is now a booming tourist destination because of its crystal beaches and stone cliffs. One of El Nido's islands, Lagen, was chosen as a site for the American reality show "Amazing Race" last year. During peak season—October to March—Asian honeymooners and backpacking Europeans arrive in droves at the ITI El Nido direct flight.

"It's a win-win effort," said Irma Marcelo, El Nido Foundation's executive director. While El Nido residents benefit from the instituted program against malaria, the private resorts profit from the improved perception of El Nido."

—**Carmela Fonbuena** in El Nido, Palawan



# Disarm the Children

**I**N SOME PARTS OF THE COUNTRY, particularly in Mindanao's conflict areas, children are said to be born with a rifle in their hands. A book, *Deadly Playground*, tells us more.

Published by the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PHILRIGHTS), *Deadly Playground* cites a conservative estimate of the total number of child soldiers in the Philippines: 1,585. They join the ranks of armed groups as combatants, couriers, guides, medics, or spies. Using inputs from child soldiers and stakeholders in the societies they belong to, the book gives us a comprehensive explanation of why and how children—instead of playing—find themselves bearing arms.

The book reveals, for example, that most Filipino child soldiers were not forced to join the armed groups, unlike their counterparts in other conflict areas in the world. Young members of the secessionist and communist groups here

volunteer to join either because they believe in the cause that the group is fighting for, or their entire families are members, or they find this a means to get back at abusive military troops. Most of them are not paid, and for Muslims, death by martyrdom is considered the highest form of service to Allah. Says the book: "When a nation's children are subject to situations of armed conflict...or where they need to contribute to the formation of an alternative political order, and are forced to take part in a war to survive, then we know that the state has failed"

The government is trying to solve the problem. In 2002, the Department of Social Welfare and Development conducted the Disarmament, Demobilization, Rehabilitation, and Reintegration (DDRR) program in Salay, Misamis Oriental—a site of recurring armed confrontations between the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the New People's Army. Se-



lected children joined in workshops, counseling, and livelihood trainings. With suggested improvements in the DDRR program, PHILRIGHTS recommends its use in other conflict areas.

To minimize the involvement of children in armed groups and reintegrate those who are already in

the mainstream, the DDRR program should be a combined effort from the local government units, the families, and the society that these children belong to. After all, as expressed by the child soldiers to PHILRIGHTS, they still dream of a "normal life."

—Carmela Fonbuena

# Mindanao Online

**I**N 2003, THE NATIONAL COMPUTER Center provided Web site domains for Mindanao's 25 provinces, 27 cities, and 405 municipalities. Each one had its domain address: [www.\[name of province, city, or municipality\].gov.ph](http://www.[name of province, city, or municipality].gov.ph). Although not all the local Web sites are updated regularly, they still provide basic information about the local government units that investors or tourists will need.

For specialized concerns, here is a list of some Web sites about Mindanao.

## CURRENT AFFAIRS

[www.mindanews.com](http://www.mindanews.com)

*Mindanews* is an online newspaper published daily by the Mindanao News and Information Cooperative Center. It is chaired by NEWSBREAK contributing writer Carolyn Arguillas.



[www.sunstar.com.ph](http://www.sunstar.com.ph)

The *Sun Star Online* home page has links to its local publications in Mindanao—Cagayan de Oro, Davao City, General Santos, and Zamboanga. It also offers daily news about the cities and the rest of Mindanao.

[www.davaotoday.com](http://www.davaotoday.com)

*Davao Today* is the newest addition to the news websites about Davao City. It is an online magazine updated weekly, offering feature stories on the issues concerning the city's politics, business, peace process, indigenous people, arts, culture, and travel, among others. It also has a "Duterte Watch" link, monitoring the activities and policies of Davao city Mayor Rodrigo Duterte. *Davao Today* is edited by Carlos Conde.

## BUSINESS AND ECONOMY

[www.mindanao.org](http://www.mindanao.org)

Part of the USAID-supported Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) project, this Web site provides a comprehensive view of Mindanao's economic growth potential. It has detailed information about Mindanao's growth zones,



economic, human, and natural resources, and location advantages. It also provides information about key Muslim organizations attending to the concerns of the Muslim population in Mindanao.

Remember, the GEM domain is a dot.org. Its dot.com counterpart—[www.mindanao.com](http://www.mindanao.com)—will lead you to a blog maintained by Bob Martin, an American businessman who has lived and established e-commerce businesses in Mindanao since the '90s. Martin's blog is also an interesting read on how a foreigner debunks many fears and misconceptions about Mindanao.

For additional information about Mindanao's economy, there's [www.medco.gov.ph](http://www.medco.gov.ph)—the Web site of the Mindanao Economic Development Council, an organization under the Office of

the President.

[www.davaochamber.org](http://www.davaochamber.org) and [www.dipologchamber.org](http://www.dipologchamber.org) are two other sites maintained by the chambers of commerce and industries of these two cities.


[www.usvirtualconsulatedavao.org.ph](http://www.usvirtualconsulatedavao.org.ph)

This site provides basic information for Americans and Davaoeños who want to operate businesses in the two locations. It explains how a US citizen or a Davaoeño can find a business partner or a market opportunity in the US or in Davao.



## TRAVEL AND TOURISM

[www.thelandofpromise.com](http://www.thelandofpromise.com)

This photo Web site showcases tourism destinations in Mindanao. The photos are taken by photojournalist Bobby Timonera and are for sale. 

# WITH THE BENEFIT OF HINDSIGHT, THE GOVERNMENT AND THE MILF ARE ON THE VERGE OF SIGNING A FINAL PEACE PACT

BY CAROLYN O. ARGUILLAS

N

ine years ago, a governor raised the Philippine flag with the red side up, angry banners and streamers screamed in strategic areas, and the President of the Philippines suffered the indignity of being pelted with tomatoes by irate protesters.

The protests came after the leakage of a document that gave a sneak preview of the final peace agreement between the government and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF): the creation of the Southern Philippines Council for Peace and Development (SPCPD) that was supposed to be the transitory mechanism in preparation for an “expanded” autonomous region in Muslim Mindanao.

These prompted the Ramos administration to hastily conduct a nationwide information campaign to explain what the SPCPD was all about, but its speakers were heckled at every stop. Mindanao historian Rudy Rodil, a member of the government peace panel that negotiated with the MNLF and now vice chair of the panel negotiating with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), recalls how at the time, in one area, he had only one elderly woman for his “audience.”

On Sept. 2, 1996, the government and the MNLF eventually signed a final peace agreement. But with most parts of the negotiations shrouded in secrecy, the peace pact suffered from a seeming lack of ownership by the various sectors outside the MNLF and government that had a stake in it.

To this day, the MNLF complains about the alleged failure of the government to fulfill its commitment in the peace agreement. What made matters worse was that the organization lost its leadership of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in the August 2005 elections; ironically, the government had used the gubernatorial post of ARMM as a sweetener during the talks, handing it to MNLF chair Nur Misuari on a silver platter.

But the Ramos government wasn't just bent on making peace

with the MNLF. If it had its way, part of the peace pact with the MNLF would have included its breakaway group, the MILF.

## FIRST ATTEMPT

On Aug. 2, 1996, or a full month before the government signed the deal with the MNLF, then Executive Secretary Ruben Torres, a classmate of Misuari at the University of the Philippines, had a clandestine meeting in Cagayan de Oro City with Ghazali Jaafar, vice chair for political affairs of the MILF. Torres didn't say much about the meeting with Jaafar that year. But at the height of President Estrada's “all-out war” against the MILF in the summer of 2000, he told this reporter that he met with Jaafar in 1996, thinking that the MILF would agree to be a part of the peace pact with the MNLF.

The MILF broke away from the MNLF in 1977 because of “policy differences,” as MILF chair Salamat Hashim explained in an interview in 2000. Initially, the name of the breakaway group was the “New Leadership of the MNLF,” but Hashim said it was confusing to many people so they renamed it to MILF in the early 1980s.

The government-MILF talks began in January 1997, still under the Ramos administration, but nothing much was achieved beyond the exploratory talks. The process continued in the next ad-



# Racing





# Against Time

FROILAN GALLARDO



ministrations with the government peace panel chaired by a succession of retired military generals—Fortunato Abat, Orlando Soriano, and Edgardo Batenga.

Jaafar headed the MILF peace panel until the summer of 2000, when Estrada declared war on the group. The MILF disbanded its peace panel on August 21, 2003, a month after the government declared “victory.” The military victory, however, has not solved the problem. As it has not since 1521.

“Large-scale military operations, especially if accompanied by highly repressive tactics that violate human rights, can make small insurgencies large and protracted,” says the 2002 Fifth Assessment Report by the United Nations Development Programme’s Multi-donor Programme for Peace and Development in Mindanao. “A disproportionate military response to insurgency can make the repressive regime against which the insurgents declare they are fighting, a self-fulfilling prophecy, whatever the reality of the situation prior to the insurgency.”

## NO TO AUTONOMY

But now it seems that there’s light at the end of the tunnel.

Nine years, three presidents, and two major wars (2000 and 2003) after the talks started, the government and MILF peace panels are about to conclude negotiations for a peace settlement to end the decades-old Bangsamoro struggle for self-determination.

What kind of settlement it is remains uncertain. What’s sure is that it’s not going to be patterned after ARMM or its “expanded” or “enhanced” versions.

“We are consistent with our stand that this problem cannot be solved by a solution which has already been tried several times without success. Autonomy has been the solution since the inception of the problem, even during the Marcos regime. They have been implementing all forms of autonomy, there have been different variations, revisions, but as we know until now, this did not solve the problem. So why go for a solution that will definitely fail, that will not solve the problem?” Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, MILF chair, says.



**BRIDGING THE GAP:** Peace panel members led by Silvestre Afable Jr. (second from left) and Al Haj Ebrahim Murad (second from right)

## T I M E

*Highlights of the GRP-MILF Peace Process from Aquino to Arroyo*  
This timeline focuses only on the peace negotiations between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). It does not include activities of civil society groups in the ongoing peace process.

### Aquino Administration

(1986 to 1992)

Government opens talks with the MILF, with Aquilino Pimentel as the chief government negotiator. No agreement is reached.

### Ramos Administration (1992-1998)

Executive Secretary Ruben Torres begins preliminary talks with MILF vice chair Ghazali Jaafar in Cagayan de Oro City. In July 1997, both sides sign an Agreement on General Cessation of Hostilities. The government is represented by retired general Fortunato Abat while the MILF is represented by Jaafar.



### Estrada administration

(1998 to 2000)

Formal peace talks open in Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao with retired general Fortunato Abat as chair of the government panel. He is later replaced by retired general Orlando Soriano who, in turn, is subsequently replaced by Edgardo Batenga, also an ex-general.

### 2000 March

President Joseph Estrada declares an “all-out war” against the MILF after the latter’s alleged takeover of the town hall of Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. The conflict is traced to a land dispute.

### 2000 April

War over the Narciso Ramos highway begins.

### 2000 July 9

Government troops take over Camp Abubakar, the MILF’s main camp.

### 2000 July 10

President Estrada visits Camp Abubakar; raises the Philippine flag and announces that all the 46 camps of the MILF have been taken over by government.

### Arroyo administration

2001 March 24

In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, both sides sign an agreement on the general framework for the resumption of talks.

### 2001 June 22

Both sides agree on three main agenda items: security, rehabilitation and ancestral domain.

### 2001 August 7

Implementing guidelines on the security aspect of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement of Peace of 2001 specify the creation of the Coordinating Committee on the Cessation of Hostilities (ccch), Local Monitoring Teams, and Organization of the Islamic Conference Monitoring Team.

### 2001 August 7

The MILF and the Moro National Liberation Front executive council sign an Agreement on the General Framework for Unity in Putrajaya, Malaysia.

### 2002 May 6

Joint communiqué is issued on the isolation and interdiction of all criminal syndicates and kidnap-for-ransom groups including the so-called ‘lost commands’ operating in Mindanao.

### 2002 March

President Arroyo suspends formal peace talks with the MILF, alleging that the rebel group violated the ceasefire pact

### 2002 May 7

Implementing guidelines are issued on the humanitarian, rehabilitation and development aspects of the GRP-MILF Tripoli Agreement on Peace of 2001.

### 2003 February 8

Mass evacuation begins in Pikit, North Cotabato





Ebrahim, former vice chair for military affairs and peace panel chair, gave up the post in late July 2003 when he took over the chairmanship of the country's largest Moro revolutionary group, after chair Salamat Hashim died from a lingering illness.

In May 2005, Mohagher Iqbal, chair of the MILF peace panel, said they were considering four types of government as possibilities in reaching a negotiated political settlement of the conflict: federal, commonwealth, association of free states, and independence. At that time, the MILF had not presented their "exact position" on any of the four possibilities to the government peace panel. They just made it clear that autonomy was "out of the question." Iqbal said: "We will not discuss autonomy. It's a failure."

Silvestere Afable Jr., the sixth government peace panel chair since 1997 (the third under the Arroyo administration), concedes that the current talks now are different from the one held by the government with the MNLF. Negotiations with the MNLF in the past,

DATA ON MILF AFFECTED BARANGAYS (Last Quarter 05)

REGION/PROVINCE	NR OF BRGYS	INFLUENCED	LESS INFLUENCED	TOTAL
<b>REGION 8</b>				
ZAMBOANGA DEL SUR	881	10	5	15
ZAMBOANGA DELGAY	385	30	8	30
ZAMBOANGA DEL NORTE	690	1	25	23
BARILAYAN	281	11	63	74
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>	<b>2,837</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>142</b>
<b>REGION 11</b>				
DAVAO DEL NORTE	234	0	5	5
DAVAO ORIENTAL	183	3	15	18
DAVAO DEL SUR	525	0	28	30
COMPOSTELA VALLEY	235	0	1	1
NORTH COTABATO	226	5	36	41
SARangani	142	15	38	54
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>	<b>1,345</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>136</b>
<b>REGION 12</b>				
LANAO DEL NORTE	596	82	88	182
LANAO DEL SUR	1,124	314	106	414
NORTH COTABATO	544	81	121	182
SULTAN HUSSAINAT	228	20	16	36
MAJULINDRAO	507	180	170	350
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>	<b>3,998</b>	<b>655</b>	<b>341</b>	<b>1,000</b>
<b>GRAND TOTAL</b>	<b>6,474</b>	<b>710</b>	<b>753</b>	<b>1,463</b>

Source: JJ

he said, focused on the "distributive" aspect of the settlement—how many rebels will join government, how many armed combatants will join the military and police, how many will be assigned to select government positions, etc. In short, it was about the distribution of power and material resources.

With the MILF, the nature of the talks has been "integrative," says

Afable, who was a member of the technical committee of the government peace panel during the 1992 to 1996 peace negotiations with the MNLF. Rather than discuss what both sides can get out of the talks, they have been focusing on contentious issues to see how they can resolve them. An example of this is the issue of ancestral domain, which is discussed in a separate story in this issue.

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#### 2003 February 10

Government peace panel led by Jesus Dureza presents draft final peace agreement with the MILF to Speaker Jose de Venecia Jr. and Senate President Franklin Drilon, separately. De Venecia calls for ceasefire in Pikit. Same draft peace agreement is presented to the President through the Executive Secretary.

#### 2003 February 11

Islamic feast of the Eid'l Adha. Government troops launch attacks against the Pentagon kidnap-for-ransom gang; these result in the displacement of at least 400,000 residents of Pikit and neighboring towns and provinces.



#### 2003 March 28

A joint statement is issued reiterating both sides' commitment to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting political statement of the conflict in Mindanao and undertake appropriate steps to pave the way for the resumption of the formal negotiations.

#### 2003 May 9

Dureza, also Presidential Assistant for Mindanao and chair of the Mindanao Economic Development Council, resigns as peace panel chair. In a five-paragraph letter to President Arroyo, Dureza says that "due to the current status of the talks and the urgency of attending to Your Excellency's directive to fast-track development efforts, I am of the view that I can give my best if I can be relieved of my tasks as chairman of the panel and concentrate in the equally important work of taking full charge of your development thrusts in Mindanao." Eduardo Ermita, then Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, succeeds Dureza as peace panel chair. In September the same year, Ermita is appointed



Defense Secretary. He gives up peace panel chairmanship in favor of Silvestre Afable.

#### 2003 May 17

President Arroyo declares war of "will and vision" against the MILF and orders selective attacks on "embedded terrorist lairs" in central and western Mindanao. That evening, she leaves for a state visit to the US. She returns a week later with US \$356-M in defense and counter-terrorism aid.

#### 2003 July 13

MILF chair Salamat Hashim succumbs to cardiac arrest and peptic ulcer in Butig, Lanao del Sur but his death is announced only on August 5 over ra-

dio station DXMAS in Cotabato City, by MILF vice chair for political affairs Ghazali Jaafar. Jaafar says the Central Committee has to meet first. MILF vice chair Al Hajj Murad Ebrahim, then MILF peace panel chair, succeeds Hashim. The new peace panel chair is MILF information chief Mohagher Iqbal.

#### 2003 July 18

The government and the MILF agree on "mutual cessation of hostilities" starting July 19. The announcement comes hours after a local court suspends the enforcement of the warrants of arrest issued against Salamat, MILF vice chair for military affairs Al Haj Murad Ebrahim (also the peace panel chair) and several other officials who are facing charges of multiple murder with multiple frustrated murder in connection with the March 4 and April 2 bombings in Davao City.

#### 2004 February 7-8

Joint Statement of the 15<sup>th</sup> CCCH reaffirms the need to sustain the

## BEYOND THE NUMBERS

The comparison can't be helped. With the MNLF, Afable says they would sit across the table negotiating numbers. But with the MILF, they sit across the table and "look at common problems then look for means to solve them in a way that would help economically, culturally, and politically."

Interim agreements had been forged on security and rehabilitation, and the ancestral domain issue is the last on the agenda. But a consensus on major points in relation to governance has been completed at the technical committee level (see sidebar).

A leakage last October 13 of signed documents that gave a sneak preview of what to expect from a peace agreement did not generate reactions similar to the 1996 response to the leakage on the SPCPD under the Ramos administration, except from Zamboanga City Mayor Celso Lobregat who denounced what he thought—gauging from the leaked consensus points—to be a

"sellout" of Mindanao to the MILF.

Lobregat has been quoted in newspaper reports as saying that the government agreed to "dismember" Mindanao "under the guise of the Muslim ancestral domain." In Zamboanga City, some radio announcers were reported to be agitating the public by calling on them to stage a rally to protest the alleged "secret agreement" signed by the Arroyo government and the MILF. A caller from Basilan was also reported to have urged citizens to take up arms and fight the MILF to prevent the dismembering of Mindanao.

But Roberto Layson, parish priest of the predominantly Moro town of Pikit, North Cotabato, a town that went through four wars between 1997 and 2003, said that opposition to the peace agreement stems mainly from a lack of understanding of its details. Citing the previous experience with the government-MNLF talks, Layson said many people overreacted to the proposed creation of the SPCPD largely because they didn't know anything about it. "They came out

with their own interpretation and created their own fears. Nine years since the signing of the GRP-MNLF agreement in 1996, events have shown that those fears were without basis."

For one, the SPCPD turned out later to be a harmless government agency that the MNLF eventually branded as powerless.

A staunch peace advocate, Layson said that the mistakes in the past are not worth repeating. In his column in *Minda Cross* newspaper, he wrote: "Only those who have personal interests to protect will continue to insist on their misguided reactions and will do everything to discredit the peace process. And there are a few of them. But the people who have suffered enough because of the armed conflict in Mindanao and who have been longing to live in peace must collectively stand to support the ongoing GRP-MILF peace talks."

Layson said there are two weapons in the armory of the government and the MILF: "the real weapons of destruction and the weapon

## T I M E L I N E

ceasefire and to further reinforce its mechanisms to consolidate and preserve the gains of the peace process. Both parties agree to formalize the joint Interim Action Teams that will proactively prevent or quickly respond and address confrontational incidents arising from government operations against criminal elements.

### 2004 March 23 to 31

An advance group of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) visits government military camps and MILF formations in Maguindanao and Lanao del Sur. The IMT is composed of 60 members (four Libyans, 10 Bruneians, and the rest Malaysians)

### 2004 October 10

IMT is deployed in Mindanao with a one-year mandate.

### 2005 April 23

Government hands over a list of 53 "wanted" criminals, Jemaah



OPAP

Islamiyah to the MILF for joint action against them in so-called "MILF areas." The order of battle includes 21 criminals and members of the Abu Sayyaf and Pentagon kidnap-for-ransom gang; the 32 are in a confidential list of alleged Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) members.

### 2005 May 29 to 30

First Bangsamoro People General Assembly in Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao. The MILF claims at least 2 million Moro people attended; independent estimates put the crowd at half a million.

### 2005 July 18

The Joint Monitoring Assistance Cen-

ter is set up "to coordinate disposition and movements of both AFP and MILF forces in connection with efforts to pursue the Abu Sayyaf and other high-value targets seeking refuge in the areas of Talayan-Guindulungan in Maguindanao.

### 2005 September 16

A joint statement on the 9<sup>th</sup> Exploratory Talks (since 28 March 2003) is issued, "successfully concluding the most difficult hurdle in the ancestral domain agenda."

### 2005 November 9

The Joint CCCH meets for the 30<sup>th</sup> time in Cotabato City, with the IMT ceasefire committees noting "tremendous reduction of incidents of alleged ceasefire violations since the deployment of the IMT in October 2004"

### 2005 December

Both panels await word from Malaysia for the 10<sup>th</sup> Exploratory Talks. **N**







LUIS LIMANAG

of negotiation. War is definitely not the solution. Negotiation is.”

### CONSULTATIVE, TRANSPARENT

Layson’s message is echoed by multisectoral groups across Mindanao. At a recent Kusog Mindanaw forum in Davao City, peace advocates were heard discussing why the October 13 leakage did not generate the same response as that in 1996. The conclusion was that the people have learned their lessons from the past.

To be sure, the MILF is reaping the gains that have been quietly achieved since the signing of the 1996 peace agreement between the government and the MNLF. For one, many peace advocacy groups have sprouted in Mindanao, expanding a peace constituency in the region. This constituency has played a critical role in reminding both sides to stick to the peace agenda and avoid past mistakes. Unlike before, many civil society groups are now actively part of the peace process with the MILF.

Among the lessons that both sides have to be constantly reminded about is the need to make the process transparent and consultative. The government peace panel initiated consultations in Mindanao before proceeding to Tripoli, Libya, in 2001 and in the subsequent formal talks that same year. The rebel group also held its own consultations.

For the first time, observers from peace groups were accredited by both sides to attend the formal talks, though they were allowed only during the ceremonial opening and closing rites. But the observers were invited by both panels to partake of the breakfast, lunch, and dinner at the venue of the talks, giving them the chance to air their views or hand over their position papers.

Civil society groups initiated their own ceasefire-monitoring scheme, “Bantay Ceasefire,” which both sides have acknowledged and commended for helping prevent conflicts on the ground from escalating into wars.

The presence since October 2004 of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) from member-countries of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) has also helped much.

Last December 7 in Cotabato City, civil society groups dis-

cussed how they would monitor the use of development funds once the peace agreement is signed.

Afable says forging a final peace agreement with the MILF is a “race against time” as “more and more moderates around the world, especially among the young people, are inclined to support terrorists.”

“We cannot dismiss terrorism if we cannot solve the problem in Mindanao, that’s where we’re headed,” he said. Afable acknowledged it is also a “race against time” in terms of settling the issue of ancestral domain, given the calls for a moratorium on the grant of mining and forestry licenses in areas that are part of the ancestral domain claims of the Moro and Lumad (indigenous peoples).

### RECOMMENDATIONS

During the “State of the Talks” consultation in Davao City last month, the Mindanao Peoples Caucus (MPC), an organization of Moro, Lumad and settler groups chaired by Layson, presented its nine-point recommendation, one of which is the “immediate declaration by government of a comprehensive moratorium on the issuance and execution of new forestry, timber and mining licenses, permits leases, concessions, titles, tenurial arrangements, and other such agreements and instruments” in the areas they claim as their ancestral domain. “This should arrest, if only for the time being, further encroachment in and diminution of Moro and IP ancestral domains,” the MPC said.

Afable acknowledged that both sides couldn’t sign an agreement on the ancestral domain issue without a moratorium on the issuance of licenses. “There has to be, at a certain point in time [a stop to the] grant of licenses until there is a new system,” he said.

Earlier, Mohagher Iqbal, MILF peace panel chair, said exploitation of mineral resources in their claimed areas could be a “source of irritants or armed confrontation and might even seriously affect the talks.” He said it was “not proper” and was even risky for the government to approve contracts with any local or international companies to undertake mining activities in areas where many of their forces are located.

Iqbal, however, said that he did

not believe in rushing the process. "A process is a process. We don't want half-baked solutions."

He is referring to the peace agreement with the MNLF, which, as far as Iqbal is concerned, was not fully implemented.

Afable acknowledges the need to sit down with the MNLF again if a just and lasting peace is to be achieved in Mindanao. The MNLF, which divided into several factions after the signing of the 1996 peace pact, has now reunified, says Muslimin Sema, Cotabato City mayor and Misuari's secretary-general who joined the Executive Council that ousted Misuari in April 2001.

Sema says the MNLF has reunited behind Misuari, whom they want freed from detention. Misuari has been detained at Fort Sta. Rosa in Laguna since January 2002, on rebellion charges. And the MILF has taken up the cudgels for Misuari as well, asking the government for his release.

Taking into consideration the lessons learned from the 1976 and 1996 peace agreements with the MNLF, Rodil listed the following considerations for a workable, doable peace pact with the MILF:

- A just solution to a social issue rather than a palliative cure to a political problem; and a peace agreement that will benefit all

Bangsamoro people;

- The resolution of Bangsamoro concerns while maintaining the rights of Lumads, non-Moros, and other constituents;
- Respect for traditional Lumad-Moro agreements;

- Ownership of the government-MILF peace process by all Mindanaons through hearing all sides;

- The complementation by MILF peace negotiations of gains in the 1996 GRP-MNLF agreement;
- Due regard for the ARMM

in MILF peace negotiations;

- A workable arrangement for Bangsamoro self-governance; and
- A peace agreement that will bring genuine development to Bangsamoro and other areas.

—MindaNews



## The Road to the Final Agreement

*The following are the "consensus points on governance" agreed upon by the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front during the 9<sup>th</sup> exploratory talks held in Malaysia in September.*

- The entrenchment of the Bangsamoro homeland as a territorial space aims to secure the identity and posterity of the Bangsamoro people, protect their proprietary rights and resources, and establish a system of government suitable and acceptable to them as a distinct dominant people. Respect for the freedom of choice of the indigenous peoples.

- Popular consultation leading to a referendum as the mode to determine the future political status of the Bangsamoro people. Details of the implementation of this mode shall be contained in the comprehensive compact.

- A transition period for institution building simultaneous with the transfer of power of governance to the Bangsamoro juridical entity prior to the determination of the final political status.

- Details on the structure of governance during the transition period of five years or, as mutually agreed, for institution building shall be embodied in the comprehensive compact. The Bangsamoro juridical entity shall be empowered to build, develop, and maintain institutions (such as civil service, electoral, financial and banking, education, legislation, legal, economic, police and internal security force, judicial system and correctional institutions) necessary for developing a progressive Bangsamoro society.

- A multinational third party to monitor the actual implementation of the comprehensive compact.


- Empowering the Bangsamoro juridical entity to legislate and administer revenue-generating measures through taxation, public borrowings (foreign and domestic), licensing, and income from government investments. The grant of authority to the Bangsamoro juridical entity in creating its own tax base, rates, customs duties and collections shall be provided in the comprehensive compact

- Establishment and entrenchment of government institutions in the Bangsamoro homeland during the transition period with defined executive, legislative, and judicial powers and functions. The contents and scope will be subject to further discussion and provided for in the comprehensive compact.

- The Bangsamoro juridical entity should be provided powers over budgeting and allocation of funds for governmental functions, development and public services. Such powers, which will be spelled out in detail in the comprehensive compact, will include financial control for government accounting and auditing systems and standards suitable to the Bangsamoro juridical entity.

- Establishment of a constitutional commission tasked to write the organic charter of the Bangsamoro juridical entity, the modalities of which shall be specified in the comprehensive compact. ■





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# Iqbal's Team

'WE ARE PATRIOTS OF A COUNTRY WHOSE SOVEREIGN AUTHORITY WAS STOLEN'

BY CAROLYN O. ARGUILLAS

**I**n 2001, it was referred to as the “green book”—this compilation of signed documents between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) from January 27, 1997 to June 15, 2000.

The ring-bound compilation of agreements, joint statements, joint communiqués, acknowledgments and resolutions, came in handy during the government-MILF formal peace negotiations in Malaysia. The compilation was not government's. It was the MILF's. Some members of the government peace panel, however, asked for copies of the “green book.”

The “green book” has since grown and is now a hardbound “red book.” A collector's item, it contains the documents signed from Jan. 27, 1997 to March 28, 2003.

The historian behind the compilations is Mohagher Iqbal, the MILF information chief who now sits as chair of the Front's peace panel. There is no new volume as yet after the “red book.”

“We're still compiling,” Iqbal says. He is the third panel chair since 1997. His counterpart on the government peace panel, Silvestre Afable, is the sixth.

Iqbal, like most senior officers of the MILF, was initially with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). When Salamat Hashim, then vice chair of MNLF head Nur Misuari, left to set up what is now the MILF, Iqbal joined him.

“I have served the struggle for 33 years,” says Iqbal, also a member of the seven-person Central Committee.

Iqbal was named chair of the peace panel by the MILF Central Committee after the death of Hashim in July 2003. But his designation as panel chair was announced only on October 20 that year.

Iqbal succeeded Al Hajj Murad Ebrahim, the vice chair for mili-

tary affairs. Ebrahim took over the chairmanship of the MILF after Hashim's death.

Iqbal and Murad have shared histories. Both are 55, and have spent 33 of those years in the struggle for Bangsamoro self-determination.

In the MILF panel, only Iqbal, like Murad before him, are organic members of the MILF. The other members are Lanang Ali, Datu Michael Mastura, and Robert Maulana “Bobby” Alonto. Musib Buat serves as alternate member.

Ali, a lawyer, is the most senior member, having chaired the panel's Technical Committee under the Ramos and Estrada administrations. He became a member of the MILF peace panel under the Arroyo administration. Ali was the first secretary of environment and natural resources of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, under the administration of Gov. Zacaria Candao.

Mastura, historian and lawyer, is a former representative of Maguindanao. A number of government peace panel members refer to him as a “hardliner,” apparently because he is the most assertive and articulate among the panel members.

But Mastura shrugs off the “hardliner” tag. “In negotiations, one is hard on issues but soft on persons. When the lines are drawn, there are no hardliners, only those true to a cause,” he says. “We are patriots of a country whose sovereign authority was stolen.”

Alonto was on the panel's technical committee before joining the panel itself. He once served as executive assistant to the president of the Mindanao State University. He writes for several Islamic magazines and once edited a weekly newspaper based in Cotabato City.

Buat, a lawyer, chairs the panel's technical committee. He also serves as alternate member of the peace panel, Iqbal says. Buat was presiding commissioner at the Mindanao Division of the National Labor Relations Commission based in Cagayan de Oro City.

Under the Ramos and Estrada administrations, the peace panel chair was Ghazali Jaafar, the MILF's vice chair for political affairs.

On the government panel, three retired military generals chaired the peace panel in succession—Fortunato Abat, Orlando Soriano and Edgardo Batenga. Batenga was chair when the MILF disbanded its peace panel under Jaafar, on August 21, 2000, a month after government declared victory over the MILF in Estrada's “all-out war.”

Under the Arroyo administration, the government's first panel chair was Presidential Assistant for Mindanao Jesus Dureza, who resigned in May 2003, in the middle of the Arroyo administration's war against the MILF. He was succeeded by then Presidential Adviser on the Peace

FOR THE STRUGGLE:  
The MILF's  
Mohagher Iqbal

Process Eduardo Ermita, another retired military general. But Ermita yielded the post to Silvestre Afable Jr. in September 2003, after he was named Defense Secretary. Ermita is now Executive Secretary.

When the MILF set up a new panel under the Arroyo administration in early 2001, Murad chaired the five-person panel. His members were Lanang Ali, Datu Michael Mastura, Iligan's former OIC mayor Allan Flores and Ahmad Alonto, Jr., former president of the Mindanao State University (MSU).

Dureza's panel was an all-Mindanaon team—Emily Marohombsar, former MSU president and peace panel member under the Estrada administration; Irene Santiago of the Mindanao Commission on Women; Muslimin Sema, Cotabato City Mayor and MNLF Secretary-General Muslimin Sema, former MSU president Emily Marohombsar; and former Lanao del Sur governor Mahid Mutilan (he later resigned from the panel when he became ARMM vice governor). —*MindaNews*



# 'Let's treat each other as partners, not as adversaries'

**A** Haj Murad Ebrahim stepped into the conference room of the Bangsamoro Development Agency office in Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao in early June 2005, showing confidence. It was a few days after a consultation that was also his first public appearance since he assumed chairmanship of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in July 2004.

Ebrahim was one semester short of completing his civil engineering degree at the Notre Dame University in Cotabato City when he joined the Moro National Liberation Front at age 22. He is now 55.

Ebrahim later became vice chair for military affairs of the MILF under Salamat Hashim, head of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces and MILF peace panel chair from early 2001 until he became chair in July last year. He spoke with MindaNews' Carol Arguillas. Excerpts:

**You seem to be oozing with confidence.**

I think everybody feels the urgency of finally resolving the problem. The people really want peace.

On the part of the government, they know that without solving the Mindanao problem, the political and economic situation of the Philippines will never progress.

And the US government [understands] that solving the problem in Mindanao will be a very big step in solving terrorism. Until the situation will become normal and there will be an effective authority in the area, only then can we control terrorism.

We also feel the sincere efforts of Malaysia in finally

finding a resolution to the problem.

**By terrorists, are you referring to locals or Jemaah Islamiya and Al Qaeda?**

The Americans and the civil government have been pointing at the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah. If ever there are local operatives, then they are under the influence of these people. This cannot be totally eradicated as long as people can still exploit issues.

Another factor is if there is no effective authority that controls an area, anybody can come in considering the seashore is so wide.

**What has the MILF, under your leadership, done to curb terrorism in Mindanao?**

We conduct intensive information campaigns among our people, letting them understand that we have a political objective to achieve.

We are not killing people because we want to kill people or because

we want to be martyrs.

**You have been saying that autonomy is out of the question. What kind of governance is the MILF envisioning?**

There has been indirect insinuation for us to accept the leadership of the ARMM but we are consistent with our stand that this problem cannot

be solved by a solution which has already been tried several times—and failed.

That's why we insisted on the Tripoli Peace Agreement [of June 2001], that we have to search for a new formula. Maybe we can look at all options, pick out from each one what fits the Bangsamoro problem, then combine.

**Your peace panel chair, Mohagher Iqbal, mentioned a federal system as one of the options.**

That can be another option. Another would be from international experience the most recent one, between the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement and the Sudanese government. There is a great similarity with the Moro; but it's the government that is Islamic and the revolutionaries are mostly non-Muslims.

We can also learn from the experience of the Irish Republican Army, the arrangement in Quebec-Canada, and East Timor. There are many more but all these can be properly studied.

**In terms of territorial scope, will this still be Moro-dominated as MILF chair Salamat Hashim envisioned?**

We are pragmatic. We know that in vying for a very wide area, we can create another problem of a minority. What is important is we will be able to [ensure that] the Moro people will be accommodated and will not lead to the creation of another minority.

**You would not want history to repeat itself.**

[Laughs]. There is a saying that a believer should not be bitten by a snake two times in one hole. Meaning you know there is already a snake there, so if you put

your hand again there, you know you will be bitten again.

**What changes have taken place in the MILF post-Salamat period?**

There have been no major changes. It is fortunate for me because now is the time when everybody feels the urgency of solving the problem. That's why even brothers in the MNLF

and other groups are trying to converge in the MILF to be united.

**What about factions?**

There is a wrong perception that there is factionalism between the religious group and the sectarian, Western-oriented group. There is no proof of that. There is no division in the MILF. Although we come from different backgrounds and look at issues differently, ultimately, there is the collegial body, the Central Committee.

**Is Camp Abubakar just a memory now?**

Camp Abubakar will never be erased in our hearts. It still exists physically, morally, spiritually. Our men are still there in portions of the area although the civilian component no longer exists.

**On the talks, only one strand in the ancestral domain issue has to be tackled.**

If we stick to what had been agreed upon—concept, territory, the way we handle resources. We're just wrapping up on governance because governance itself, although a ticklish issue, is only a glue to concept, territory, resources. It's just a matter of putting this together.

**What kind of glue should we be looking at?**

It can be federal. An association of states can also be another glue, a commonwealth.

All this can be pieced one by one and then put together. That's why I've talked to the chairman of the government panel, Sec. [Silvestre] Afable, several times. I always insinuate to him that the best way for the GRP and the MILF to arrive at a solution to the problem is we treat each other as partners. We are not adversaries. **N**

# Cease Fire!

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MANY YEARS, THERE'S A BIG DROP IN THE NUMBER OF ARMED ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN THE AFP AND THE MILF

BY JOWEL F. CANUDAY

**T**eamwork keeps armed conflicts away. It may be unlikely for foes to team up, but not for the Joint Coordinating Committees on the Cessation of Hostilities (CCCH) of the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The heads of both committees claim it is their "very good teamwork" that has led to the drastic reduction of armed confrontations in the strife-torn areas (*see table*). "We have very good relations," said Von Al Haq, chair of the MILF panel in the joint committees.

Army Maj. Dickson Hermoso, chief of the government panel in the joint committees, reported that before they found ways to exercise teamwork, the number of armed encounters between government soldiers and MILF guerrillas was a high of 500 incidents every year or an average of at least one battle a day.

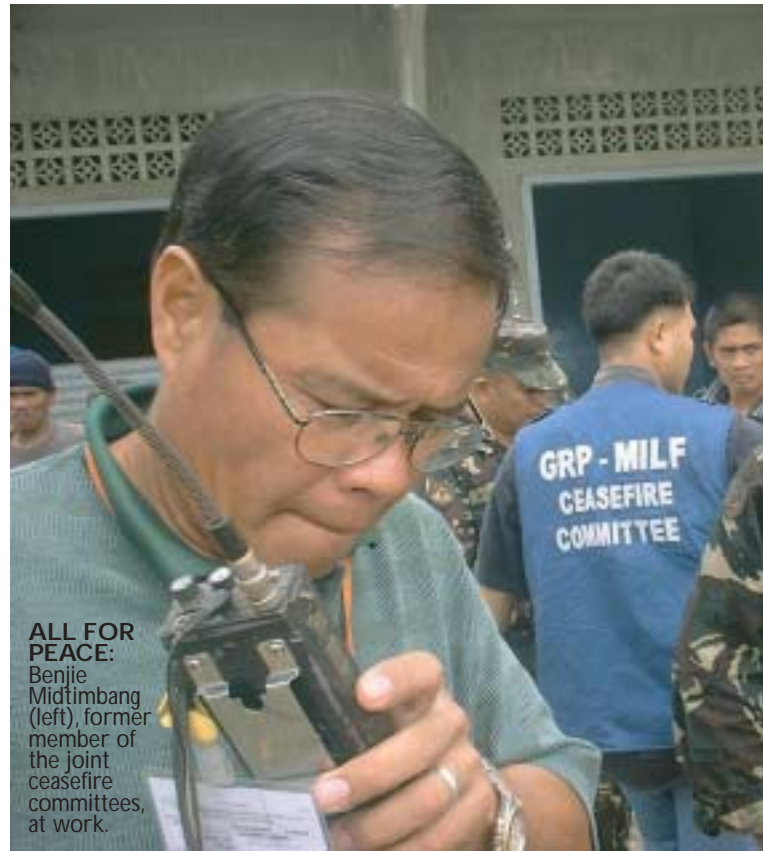
The fighting has since subsided. In fact, from June to August of 2005, both panels have not monitored any armed encounters between the military and the rebels.

A graph based on records from the government peace panel shows a downward trend in government-MILF armed skirmishes,

accompanied by an upward trend in the gross regional domestic product (GRDP) in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), where most of the conflict-affected areas are.

The skirmishes dropped from 698 incidents in 2002 to 559 in 2003, then to 15 in 2004. For this year, only 10 incidents had been reported as of November 25. Meanwhile, the GRDP in the autonomous region grew by 5.9 percent from 2002 to 2003 and by 17.7 percent from 2003 to 2004.

In responding to reports of conflict situations, senior officers of the joint committees such as Hermoso and Al Haq would board the same vehicle to reach the scene and investigate the circumstances behind an alleged breach in the ceasefire. Their findings are reported to the heads of their respective peace panels. Allegations of ceasefire violations are then addressed during formal joint



**ALL FOR PEACE:** Benjie Midtimbang (left), former member of the joint ceasefire committees, at work.

meetings by the two panels.

In some incidents, the government and the MILF leadership deploy the CCCH with a mission to de-escalate armed confrontations such as what happened in some towns of Maguindanao last year.

Hermoso said that many of the government-MILF armed confrontations in these areas were triggered by clan conflicts, but the joint CCCH managed to prevent their escalation into a full-blown war by quickly calling field commanders of both sides to a ceasefire.

"We look at the present situation as a dynamic process composed of alternate cycles of escalation and de-escalation. In the short term, our objective is to separate forces physically by asking moments of silence," Hermoso said.

Getting both sides to agree to a ceasefire is not without risks because of the possibility of getting caught in the crossfire.

Last month, a team of the joint committees was shot at by armed men belonging to one of warring clans in Lanao del Sur after their vehicle was mistaken for that of the enemy clan's. "We risk our lives in the middle of the fighting forces," Al Haq said.

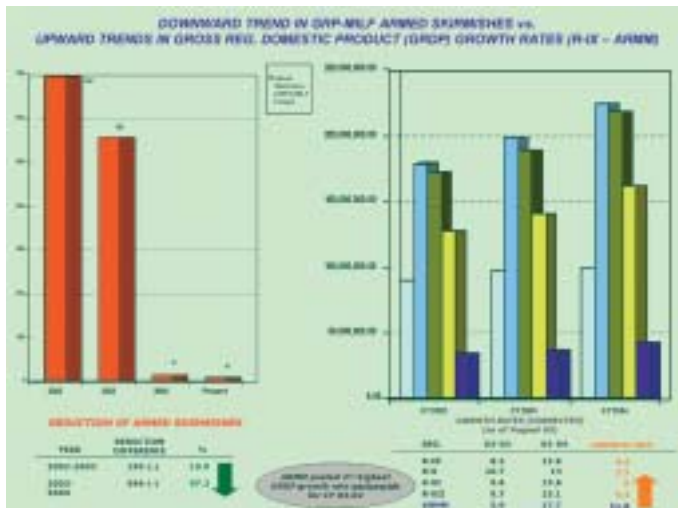
The risks and the success of the CCCH in significantly reducing the tension have earned the admiration of civil society groups that are also monitoring the implementation of the ceasefire agreement.

Roberto Layson, parish priest of Pikit, North Cotabato, and one of the founders of the civilian-led Bantay Ceasefire, noted that the reduction of the armed confrontations created a conducive atmosphere, both in sustaining the government-MILF peace process and enabling communities to repair social relationships.

Layson said the absence of armed confrontations in Pikit, a town which experienced four wars between 1997 and 2003, has made it possible for Christians and Muslims to talk again and has led to a better economic climate as villagers are able to plant and harvest again.

Al Haq recognized the active role of civil society in monitoring the work of the joint committees and the observance of ceasefire by forces on the ground. For example, the Bantay Ceasefire monitoring reports helped clarify many of the contentious issues in ceasefire violation complaints lodged by both sides, according to Al Haq.

Hermoso said that Bantay







# The Negotiators

BY MIA GONZALEZ

THEY DON'T TALK BIG. WHEN THEY WERE SWORN IN, EVERYONE RECITED THEIR OATH AS IF THEY WERE PRAYING.

## SILVESTRE AFABLE JR.

*'Negotiations with the rebels is 90 percent listening'*  
—Silvestre Afable Jr.

Early in his stint as head of the Presidential Management Staff (PMS) in the first term of President Arroyo, Silvestre Afable Jr. demonstrated the traits considered most important in any career in public service: patience, a listening ear, and a healthy degree of tolerance.

Responding to a question on fake presidential appointees, Afable told Palace reporters about a woman who came to his office one day, asking for help to expedite her appointment. There was nothing unusual about the woman, and she presented her appointment

paper, so Afable accommodated her—even when she started to sound delusional. Despite the discovery that she was not the person she claimed to be, Afable entertained her and had her served a light snack. He let the woman off without any consequence. This, he said, was consistent with his belief in “human excellence.”

Afable exudes an air of coolness, which many say has helped him earn the trust of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The other members of the government negotiating panel, which Afable heads, echo this common perception. He speaks in an even tone, never raises his voice, and honestly listens to what the other side has to say. In an interview before the five-member panel headed for Kuala



Ceasefire, which they included as a significant segment of their “peace process chart,” helped them plan and explore some “techniques of intervention.” He said Layson’s group provided them with “ideas as we look together for effective intervention both in the physical sense and in putting pressure on their [the government’s and MILF’s] field commanders,” Hermoso said.

Al Haq said the presence of the International Monitoring Team (IMT) had “tremendously” contributed to the stability of the ceasefire agreement. He said the IMT’s presence helped their efforts in ensuring that everybody observed the ceasefire agreement. The team has been a good “sounding board” for both sides, and this has made the joint committees more flexible in dealing with complaints of ceasefire violations.

Al Haq said the success of the ceasefire committee lies as much in what the government and the MILF have done as in the effective presence of the Malaysian-led foreign observers and civilians monitoring the ceasefire. “In the end, our success is due both to everybody’s concern to finally have peace and to teamwork.”

—MindaNews

**COMMITTED:**  
Members of the government peace panel take their oath before President Arroyo.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF OPAP

Lumpur in April 2005 for formal negotiations with the MILF, Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita said, "I am very confident in terms of [the peace panel's] capacity and their competence because this is headed by Sec. Silvestre Afable who has been on the subject matter for a long, long time.... I would not have thought of anybody to lead the GRP panel who could bring home the bacon than Yong Afable."

When asked about his approach to negotiations with the MILF, Afable said, "Negotiations with rebels is 90 percent listening, trying to sit on one side of the table and looking at problems from a common prism. You'd be surprised that they are willing to listen to you also."

Afable is no stranger to negotiations. In 1980, he was a member of the Department of National Defense Ad Hoc Committee for the RP-US Military Bases Agreement negotiations. He worked with Ermita in peace negotiations with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), where he served as a technical consultant.

He joined the Arroyo administration in 2001 as undersecretary of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process before he was tasked as PMS chief, then as concurrent acting press secretary and presidential spokesperson.

Afable was dispatched to the Netherlands in 2003 in a vain attempt to jumpstart peace negotiations with the National Democratic Front. When Mrs. Arroyo won her second term, she retained him at the PMS but later appointed him as Palace Communications Director, a new position. Alongside his primary job of improving Malacañang's communication operations, he was at the helm of government negotiations with the MILF, where he is said to be doing quite well, as shown by the positive results of the formal negotiations in Kuala Lumpur. Afable, who is from the Cordilleras, is also the Cabinet Officer for Regional Development in the Cordillera Administrative Region, which makes him directly involved in negotiations centered on the resolution of ancestral domain issues. (Afable resigned from his post as communications director on July 18, 2005 not for political reasons, he said, but to concentrate on the peace process.)

Retired Gen. Rodolfo Garcia, a panel member, said of Afable: "He weighs his options very well. He consults with us for a win-win solution. He has a knack for being able to dissect issues very quickly and grasp the import of a particular issue and reduce it to the bottom line." Fellow panel member Professor Rudy Rodil agrees: "He does not talk big. He goes straight to the point. His statements are realistic. He never raises his voice; that's very important in peace negotiations. And he doesn't say anything that cannot be done."

There is an even mix in the government panel. Afable has overall knowledge of the aspects of the negotiations and the members are experts in various fields—politics, security, rural development, and ancestral domain. Whether by coincidence or design, all the members are like their chairman—generally reticent and not given to podium-pounding. When they were sworn in by the President in Malacañang, everyone recited their oath as if they were saying personal prayers.

Garcia recalls that when the two panels met in Kuala Lumpur on the Ad Hoc Joint Action Group, positions were polarized on the initial demand of the MILF to obtain a 72-hour notice for military operations, which threatened the fate of the negotiations. The government panel, which was not keen on it as it would make such operations pointless, delivered its point as calmly and as soberly as possible. Never once did anyone from the government raise his or her voice. The MILF later agreed to a 24-hour notice, even allowing the exemption of military operations involving high priority targets.

"Eventually, I think it was more of the MILF that tried to understand our situation. That indicates a lot about the people we are negotiating with. They're not unreasonable. Ordinarily, that could have been the end of the negotiations," Garcia said.

## LT. GEN. RODOLFO GARCIA

*'We need to veer away from the mindset of just relying on the military option'*  
—Rodolfo Garcia

Though former Armed Forces Vice Chief of Staff Rodolfo Garcia hails from Bulacan, he regards

himself as part-Mindanaoan, having spent a total of ten years spanning over three decades on assignment in the conflict-battered region. "I think the ten years that I spent there made me understand more or less the true situation in Mindanao," he said. Garcia believes "at no other time do we have a better chance at peace in Mindanao than now."

Garcia was on his second year at the University of the Philippines College of Engineering when he passed the entrance exam at the Philippine Military Academy (PMA). Without hesitation, he abandoned a safer career in engineering to pursue what he believed to be his true calling: to become a soldier like his father, Col. Nicanor Garcia, who served with the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion Combat Team in the Korean War, the first and most battered battalion to fight there.

When he graduated from the PMA in 1970, Garcia was assigned to Mindanao where the MNLF had begun its bloody quest for secession. He had three more combat tours to that region from 1994 to 1998: as a battalion commander, a brigade commander in Central Mindanao, and a division commander of the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

When he first arrived as a lieutenant in Central Mindanao in 1970, the government policy was to eliminate the secessionists without taking stock of the roots of the problem. "My assignment in Mindanao has made me believe that we need to veer away from what used to be the mindset of just relying on the military option," he said. Garcia came face to face with MILF officials to peacefully resolve the armed conflict in the Malitubog-Maridagao (Malmar) irrigation project in Carmen, North Cotabato, and again at Matanog, to break the standoff between military and MILF forces.



Several years later, as AFP Vice Chief, he met with MILF officials again, this time as co-chair of the Ceasefire Committee for Cessation of Hostilities, which helped maintain relative peace between the two sides. The successful ceasefire reduced the level of violence between the two sides in Mindanao "very drastically." From a high of 500 confrontations every year, it plunged to about 60 to 70. More importantly, there was a reduction in the number of casualties on both sides, from 200 casualties on the AFP side every year down to 10 during the ceasefire period. There have been zero skirmishes since May 2005.

Garcia said that in terms of the Mindanao conflict, the best position is neither to be a hawk nor a dove but to be an "owl" or "to be wise, to be reasonable, to know when to use the military option because it's still necessary." Furthermore, it is important to "feel for the other side" so one could answer the question, "What makes them do what they do?"

## SYLVIA OKINLAY-PARAGUYA

*The women will be looking at how I will make sure that the women's agenda will not be overlooked'*  
—Sylvia Okinlay-Paraguay



Fate may have veered Sylvia Okinlay-Paraguay—the only woman, Lumad, and civil society representative on the peace panel—toward peace negotiations with the MILF.

Born and raised in Bukidnon by farmer parents, she was a licensed chemical engineer at the National Steel Corporation in the late '80s when she obtained a scholarship for graduate studies at the Asian Institute of Management.

After she obtained her master's degree, she worked as an assistant manager for information and education at the World Trade Center in



Manila. As fate would have it, her budding corporate career was nipped in the bud by the Gulf War. She promptly returned to Mindanao as she wanted to be home should the Middle East conflict spill into the country. Back in Bukidnon, a friend endorsed her to work for the Philippine Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in the Rural Area-Mindanao, where she headed the agrarian reform and rural development department.

Paraguya later moved to the Mindanao Alliance of Self-Help Societies-Southern Philippines Educational Center, a confederation of cooperatives in Mindanao with key operations in twenty provinces, including Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and the Caraga Region.

For the last two years, she has been chairing the Mindanao Coalition of Development NGO Networks, which advocates peace, environmental protection, and sustainable development in Mindanao. She may have the skills to return to the corporate world, but her less profitable development work has become her niche.

Paraguya was initially unsure of her readiness to join the peace panel, but when it came to decision time, she took the job. After all, she had experience in agrarian reform, which is directly linked to the ancestral domain issue. When she was interviewed by panel chair Afable before she was finally recruited into the panel, she told him: "My experience in peace is how to work with the communities. And in agrarian reform, you have a lot of negotiations with the landowners." She thinks peace talks can be conducted alongside development programs to further improve the atmosphere of the negotiations.

As a member of the panel, Paraguya feels a great amount of pressure because "the women will be looking at how I will be able to make sure that the women's agenda will not be overlooked. I am a Lumad so the Lumad of Mindanao will also look at how I will be able to ensure that the Lumads are taken care of."

## RUDY RODIL

*'Let's look at each other as equals rather than you, Muslim; me, Christian'*  
—Rudy Rodil

Professor Rudy "Ompong" Rodil says he can make a contribution to the peace process in Mindanao by "straightening out its history." Rodil has been trying to do just that for the last thirty years or so. He believes the Mindanao conflict has never been premised on any true enmity between Muslims and Christians, but was the handiwork of foreign colonizers who marginalized Muslims in their own land, a policy perpetuated even after the Philippines regained its independence.

Anyone who wants to have a better understanding of the roots of the Mindanao problem should leaf through the work of Rodil, a history professor at the Mindanao State University-Iligan Institute of Technology. He has written over 70 articles on the peoples of Mindanao, and can speak on the ancestral domain issue in Mindanao from any angle, lecture-length if required, without any notes. He chairs the Technical Committee on Ancestral Domain, coordinating all four sub-committees on Concept, Territory, Resources, and Governance in the government panel.

Last year, Rodil authored "A Story of Mindanao and Sulu in Question and Answer," which educator and prizewinning writer Jaime An Lim described as "enlightening" as it is "a book that to all indications, should have been full only of despair [but] eventually becomes life-affirming."

The book reflects Rodil's own rational optimism about the rebirth of peace in Mindanao.

Because of problems with cattle rustlers, Rodil's parents and siblings moved from Cavite to Upi, Maguindanao prior to his birth in 1942, bringing with them all their possessions, including their *tapayan*. More than three decades later, that earthen jar would break to pieces when the MNLF attacked Rodil's hometown, taking hos-



tages and literally bringing the conflict to his very home. At the time, he was teaching at the Ateneo de Davao. "That was when I really had a deeper appreciation of the conflict. I would hear my relatives' sentiments—candid and raw. I heard these things before from other people but I never really took notice. But when it happened to my relatives, I really felt it," he said.

That same year, he became the research assistant of lawyer Michael Mastura, former congressman and now a member of the MILF panel, who was working on the history of the people of Maguindanao. In his studies, Rodil

discovered that Muslims and Christians were not at odds with each other, as others believed, but were pitted against each other by the Spanish colonizers, then by the Americans who enacted laws that encouraged and favored Christians settlers in Mindanao. The MNLF movement, from which the MILF was spawned, was premised on regaining the dignity that the Bangsamoro people lost when they were driven out of and discriminated against in their own land.

In his book, Rodil advocates "kapatiran" in Mindanao, a term he prefers over the sexist "brotherhood." "Let's look at each other as equals rather than you, Muslim; me, Christian.

And together we can strive towards a common identity. This time, we will decide, not the foreigners. That's what I like about these negotiations," he said.

## DATU PAX MANGADADATU

*He is the first-ever Muslim to be elected governor in a predominantly Christian province*

Sultan Kudarat Gov. Datu Pax

Mangadadatu has been governor of his province since 1998, immediately after a ten-year stint as municipal mayor of Lutayan. Those who wonder why he has been tapped to participate in peace negotiations with the MILF only have to remember that he is the first-ever Muslim to be elected governor of a predominantly Christian province.

Popularly known in his province as Governor Datu Pax, Mangadadatu was a registrar of the Land Transportation Office in Tacurong, Sultan Kudarat before he embarked on a political career. He represents Region 12 in the League of Provinces of the Philippines and also chairs the region's Peace and Order Council.

Afable said Mangadadatu's status as the only Muslim governor in a predominantly Christian province is "unprecedented, a clear reflection of his skills in integrating different cultures and different religious groups, and his capacity for good governance. They won't vote for you if you are not really transparent and a competent leader."

Mangadadatu, according to fellow panel member Gen. Rodolfo Garcia, is in charge of the political aspect of the negotiations, having been a local official in Central Mindanao for the last 17 years. "He's a native of Mindanao. He's a Maguindanaon. He'll be able to know the issues that are close to the heart of Maguindanaons, of Muslims in general, of Mindanaoans," Garcia said.

When thousands of families in Maguindanao and North Cotabato were displaced by fighting between government and MILF troops around the area in 2003, President Arroyo appointed Mangadadatu to monitor the use of hundreds of millions of pesos in cash and humanitarian assistance and ensure that they reached the beneficiaries. Mangadadatu was indirectly involved in seeking peace with the MILF as early as in 2000, when MILF rebels stormed Sultan Kudarat. He sent emissaries to establish contact with the MILF.

Sylvia Okinlay-Paraguya, another member of the government panel, said Mangadadatu has many programs in his area and knows how to deal with both Muslims and Christians, a key to his successful political career. **N**

# IS THE MILF FACTIONALIZED OR ARE WE UNDERESTIMATING ITS COHESIVENESS?

**U**naccompanied by armed bodyguards, Ghajali Jaafar arrives usually in the morning at the field office of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a modest compound in the town of Sultan Kudarat. He sits behind a wooden table, a green flag behind him. This has been his daily routine since the rebel group to which he belongs began peace talks with the government.

Wearing a blue shirt during an interview with NEWSBREAK, Jaafar looked like a retired businessman. In truth, he is a veteran of the separatist war in Mindanao and at present vice chair for political affairs of the MILF, which has an estimated 15,000 armed combatants in southern Mindanao. A good orator and propagandist, he is accessible to practically everyone: journalists, politicians, foreign visitors. For instance, during the time of President Ramos, Jaafar was seen often in the company of Ramos's executive secretary, Ruben Torres, who had been tasked with persuading the MILF to return to the negotiating table. They looked like buddies so that the rumor soon circulated that Jaafar was getting too close to the government.

Compare this to the demeanor of another MILF leader, Aleem Abdulaziz Mimbantas, a quiet and intense ideologue who is rarely accessible to the media. Or to the late Salamat Hashim, the MILF's revered leader, who lived an almost reclusive life in his last years. Or to Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, who is comfortable in fatigues, having been the military chief of the organization for a long time. It was Murad who replaced Salamat as chairman of the



**MOST ACCESSIBLE:** MILF's Ghajali Jaafar (right) and the rank and file

## 20 Years A

MILF (see *Hot Seat*).

The MILF leadership is indeed a mixed lot; members of its powerful central committee come from various Muslim tribes as well. These are often cited as basis for claims that the group is factionalized.

### VARIOUS HUES

Sydney Jones of the International Crisis Group, a think tank based in Brussels, contended in a July 2004 paper that Salamat's anointed successor was not Murad but

Mimbantas, 59, who like Salamat graduated from the Al-Azhar University of Egypt in 1974.

A Maranao, Mimbantas was the most trusted of Salamat's lieutenants, according to Jones. She asserts that while Mimbantas had the strong support of the ulama, his armed following could not match that of Murad, who has 5,000 armed men loyal to him. Jones suggests that the leadership transition after Salamat's death in July 2003 had not been smooth. She cites problems about "rebel [MILF] commanders" as well as remote com-

mands that act autonomously from the central command.

But other experts point to a cohesive central committee, the policymaking body of the MILF. In a paper marking the 20<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary of the organization last year, Dr. Zachary Abuza, an American academic who has done extensive research on armed groups in Mindanao, said that while the central committee members have "clearly differences of opinions over certain policies (Jemaah Islamiya, for example)," there is "no overt factionalism that

THE POTENTIAL FOR FACTIONALISM IS THERE, ESPECIALLY OVER A PEACE AGREEMENT W





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ROMEO GARCIA

hampers decision-making or threatens the organization as a whole." He cites the fact that not one leader has his own armed faction that can "subvert or ignore the decisions" of the central committee. He acknowledged, however, that the "potential for factionalism is there, especially over a peace agreement with the government that falls short of full independence or a referendum."

Central Committee members include Murad, Mimbantas, Jaafar, and Mohagher Iqbal. They are hardened mujahideen fighters



FRILAN GALLARDO

who formed the leadership of the Bangsamoro rebellion in the 1960s and 1970s. The committee has one female member, who heads the sub-committee on social work and has been assigned to organize Muslim women.

Since the death of Salamat on July 13, 2003, the Central Committee has taken a more crucial role in setting the direction for the movement. And it has attracted more attention now than in the past because before, people considered Salamat to be the all-powerful, all-influential leader of the movement.

MILF spokesperson Eid Kabalu said that the Central Committee rarely meets as a group; it does so only to discuss very important issues. But the members keep in touch regularly with each other through e-mail, mobile phone, and the old-fashioned courier system. Day-to-day operations are supervised by an executive committee, which is also chaired by Murad.

Most of the Central Committee members come from Maguindanao, the bailiwick of the MILF. However, Kabalu disclosed a plan to add another member from Western Mindanao, where he said the rebel group has expanded.

#### JAAFAR: BREAKAWAY

"Many of the central committee members fought with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in their early years. They practically grew up together so they know each other very well,"

Kabalu said.

In 1977, the MILF broke away from the secular MNLF. This was a year after the MNLF signed a peace agreement with the Marcos government that was brokered by Libya. "We felt that we were not consulted by [MNLF] chairman Nur Misuari [on the peace agreement]. We decided to form a new bloc and continue the struggle," Jaafar said.

It was only in 1984 that the organization officially became the MILF. It sought to es-

tablish an independent homeland for the Muslims that would be governed by the *shari'a* (Islamic law). "The split was peaceful. There was no bloodletting like what happened to other liberation groups. It was because we are Muslims," Jaafar said. The two groups also broke up along ethnic lines. The MNLF is dominated by the Tausugs from Sulu, and the MILF by the Maguindanaoans and the Maranaws.

Of the central committee members of the MILF, Jaafar, who hails from Maguindanao, is the most visible and accessible. In his 60s, Jaafar often directs the political affairs of the rebel group from its field office in Barangay Simuay, Sultan Kudarat town in "pulpit."

"Then the Jabidah massacre in Corregidor happened. The entire Bangsamoro people were galvanized into unity. We had to defend ourselves," he recalled. The Jabidah massacre happened on March 18, 1968, on Corregidor Island. Young Muslim recruits were trained by the Philippine Army in a clandestine plan to seize a state of Malaysia, Sabah, to which the Philippine government had a claim. When they learned of the plot, the Muslim recruits refused to continue and were shot by their Army trainers. Moro historians see the Jabidah massacre as the trigger that launched the separatist war.

The MNLF agreed to negotiate for a peaceful settlement of the conflict in 1976, thus the Tripoli agreement. However, the rebels said

later that the government did not fulfill its commitment to the Tripoli pact, prompting them to declare war on the state again. Finally in 1996, it entered into another peace deal with the Ramos government.

For the MILF, there are many lessons to be learned from the MNLF. Mohagher Iqbal, MILF central committee member, has internalized these lessons; he is the head of the rebel group's panel now negotiating with the Arroyo administration.

#### IQBAL: STRUGGLE IN CYBERSPACE

Iqbal is no stranger to the tasks of negotiating peace with the Philippine government. He was part of the first panel that held talks with the government in 1997.

A writer, Iqbal heads the committee on information and is credited for bringing the MILF struggle to cyberspace. The MILF Web page [www.luwaran.com](http://www.luwaran.com) is widely read for its articles on the Bangsamoro struggle and the ongoing peace talks.

Iqbal, 57, finished his political science degree at the Manuel L. Quezon University in Manila before joining the rebel movement. He holds a master degree in political science. His motto in the revolution is: "There is no rocky hill to an iron will." Iqbal describes his role in the central committee as a consensus-builder. "I am very persuasive. I try to dialogue with people to win them over," Iqbal told NEWSBREAK in an interview inside their rebel stronghold in Darapanan, Sultan Kudarat.

Members of the central committee discuss policy and strategic issues, arrive at a decision by consensus if there are differing opinions, according to Iqbal. "It is very rare for us to vote. Sometimes it takes a long time for the committee to decide but we are not like the Philippine Congress," he adds in jest. Iqbal emphasized that the MILF is not dictated upon by any single leader. This would avoid the pitfalls of the MNLF, which centralized command on Misuari, he explains.

He said the executive committee, which is also headed by Murad, implements the policies and decisions of the Central Committee. The Executive Committee

WITH THE GOVERNMENT THAT FALLS SHORT OF FULL INDEPENDENCE OR A REFERENDUM.

has three vice chairmen for political, external and military affairs. Asked why there was only one woman on the Central Committee, Iqbal said there were no other qualified female candidates. He said the committee would have accepted a female had there been a qualified candidate. He said that is also the reason the MILF does not have women mujahideen fighters on the battlefield.

"We do not resent having women combatants but generally their role is auxiliary. The role of women in our struggle is complimentary," Iqbal said.

### KABALU: THE REBELS' VOICE

The responsibility of explaining the MILF to the public lies with Kabalu, its affable spokesperson who loves giving interviews under a big mango tree in his house in Cotabato City.

Kabalu joined the separatist rebellion in 1978, but was detained and tortured later, he claims, at the military headquarters in Camp Awang, Maguindanao. He was released in 1980. Kabalu said it was the horrors inflicted by a Christian paramilitary vigilante group, the Ilagas, that drove him to rebel. "I realized that we had to defend ourselves against the Ilagas. We did not have any choice," he said.

Before becoming a rebel, Kabalu took up Islamic Studies at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City. He later finished his Bachelor of Science in Criminology at the Philippine Harvardian College in Cotabato City. Kabalu finished law at Notre Dame University in Cotabato City.

Kabalu said he joined the MNLF and, like the others, was disillusioned with Misuari. The disillusionment grew until in 1979, he joined Jaafar and the others to help organize the MILF.

Since then Kabalu served the MILF as its spokesperson, engaging in a verbal tussle with the military and keeping up the propaganda against the government.

But for now, what the MILF is greatly concerned about is the political crisis facing President Arroyo. "We are concerned if there will be a leadership change. Naturally, it will delay the peace process between us and the Philippine government," he said.

—*Froilan Gallardo in Central Mindanao*



**'PROSPERITY NEIGHBOR':**  
President Arroyo with Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi (above). Former Malaysian Prime Minister Mohammad Mahathir was the first broker (next page).

TAMMY DAVID

# Honest Broker

MALAYSIA'S ROLE IN THIS PEACE PROCESS HAS YET TO REACH ITS FULL POTENTIAL

BY SOLIMAN M. SANTOS JR.



any know that Malaysia is host and facilitator of the peace negotiations between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Why has Malaysia gotten into this? And why have the two parties allowed it?

Malaysia's third-party role marks the second or "Diplomatic Stage" of the negotiations since March 2001. The first or "Domestic Stage" from 1997 to 2000 (ended by the "all-out war" in the summer of that year) was conducted without any foreign third-party role.

Mediation by a member country of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and a neutral foreign venue were two of the three conditions (the third being the honoring of all past agreements) posed by the MILF to resume post-"all-out war" negotia-

tions. The parties agreed on Malaysia, an OIC member, which nevertheless does not act on the organization's behalf.

Malaysia's facilitation, aside from hosting the talks, has usually involved the following functions: providing a conducive atmosphere and facilities, conveying the positions of the parties, playing "referee" and bridging differences between the parties, witnessing commitments and understandings, and recording details of agreements by the parties.

The Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), particularly its "Re-

search Department," which is actually its intelligence branch, has served as the Malaysian secretariat for the peace talks. For the most part this secretariat was headed by Director General for Research Datuk Zakaria Abdul Hamid, with Datuk Tengku Abdul Jaafar Mohammad assisting and then taking over. But the key Malaysian official was no less than Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad (until his retirement in October 2003), who was approached by then Philippine Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in late 2000.

Since October 2004, Malaysia has been leading an International Monitoring Team (IMT) to monitor the ceasefire and other interim agreements. The Malaysian Technical Cooperation Program is also providing capability-building support to the Bangsamoro Development Agency, the NGO designated by the MILF to implement interim agreements on the rehabilitation and development of conflict-af-





fectured areas in Central Mindanao.

## MEDIATION

Malaysia has actually taken on a higher level of mediation, particularly in devising a resolution which includes the following parameters: respect for Philippine territorial integrity and sovereignty, no secession or independence, assurance of the rights of the Bangsamoro as citizens, MILF-Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) unity to complement existing solutions, and the combating of radicalism and the militant tendency by the Moro movement.

All told, Malaysia's role has been a major influence, although not the only one, on the MILF's dropping of its independence goal. The specific non-independence solution, however, has yet to be determined.

At some point, this process must interface with the implementation of the 1996 Peace Agreement with the MNLF on autonomy. It is significant therefore that some rounds of formal and back-channel talks between the GRP and MILF in Malaysia were accompanied on the side by MILF-MNLF unity meetings in the same venue—seen by some as “a parallel negotiation.” Note, however, that the GRP-MNLF track of the Mindanao peace process has its own official third-party mechanism in the OIC.

The other substantive input of Malaysia is promoting its preferred approach of economic development, with itself as a model nation merging Islam and modernity. Malaysia seems to be impressing a certain thesis on the MILF: if a group of people is economically well off, then other things will follow.

# MALAYSIA SHOULD UPGRADE ITS SECRETARIAT FOR THE PEACE TALKS TO BRING IN EXPERTS FROM THE MINISTRIES OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENSE

For Malaysia, the bottom line is economics. Malaysia has a global perspective and wants to show that Southeast Asian countries can be as economically developed as others.

The Malaysian venue for the formal peace talks is itself an exposure tour or program for the peace negotiators. There are lessons from the Malaysian experience relevant to a solution of the Bangsamoro problem: federalism, Islamic institutions, multiculturalism, the *bumiputra* (indigenous Malays) policy of affirmative action, and the sultanate as an institution.

## ‘PROSPER THY NEIGHBOR’

Events in the southern Philippines have become part of Malaysian national interest: security concerns about piracy and kidnapping (remember Sipadan), social concerns about refugees and illegal migrants, and economic concerns about stability and investments. Malaysia seeks a stable Philippines in the context of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), considering the history of Southeast Asian instability in the 1950s and 1960s.

This represents sophisticated geopolitical strategy on the part of Malaysia, exemplified by its well-known foreign policy of “Prosper thy neighbor.” Malaysian policy is not likely to change under the new Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi other than, perhaps, a “kinder and gentler” touch. Besides, Malaysian mediation is not a domestic political or election issue.

The dropping of the Sabah claim by Manila is not the driving motivation behind Malaysia's role, as far as we can gather from knowledgeable informants from Malaysia. They say it is not so much the Sabah claim (already considered a “non-issue”) as it is the *other* Sabah issues. Sabah is so close to Mindanao that any war there will result in the influx of refugees and illegal migrants to Sabah, bringing social, economic, and security problems. But in the Philippines, especially among the Tausug and MNLF, there are persistent suspicions about a hidden agenda.

There is genuine concern about

the Muslim minority in the Philippines among the Muslim Malays. But the Malaysians' preferred form of assistance is through peace initiatives that would contribute to Philippine stability, not through support for armed struggles for liberation. To the moderate Muslim Malay mind, the latter would rock the boat of economic well-being already achieved by Malaysia.

One sub-plot is the long-standing dynamic of Malaysian-Philippine relations. As United Nations Development Program analyst Dr. Paul Oquist has said, “The stabilization of the situation regarding Filipino nationals in Sabah (mostly Tausug and many linked to the Bangsamoro insurgency across the years) is also a prerequisite to peace, as is the maintenance of friendly relations between Malaysia and the Philippines. The recent increase in the level of deportations of illegal immigrants from Malaysia, accusations of mistreatment of detainees by Malaysian officials, and a clamor in Filipino public opinion in this context to reopen the Philippine claim on Sabah, are all factors that must be addressed to construct peace nationally and in the sub-region.”

## ‘SEGURISTA’

Both parties in the peace negotiations consented to Malaysian involvement because they apparently viewed it as advantageous. The Philippine government and the MILF are all praises for Malaysia's facilitation, no doubt made easier by the common Malay culture and temperament of the key players.

Then Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (now Executive Secretary) Eduardo Ermita described it as “very effective.” Al Haj Murad Ebrahim, then MILF Peace panel chairman (now MILF head), referred to it as “helping a lot, not necessarily the position of the MILF, but to push the negotiations.” This is perhaps the one constant amid the highs and lows of the peace process.

Still, Malaysia's third-party role was not a deterrent to the “Buliok

offensive” of February 2003, which has resulted in the two-year suspension of the negotiations.

Moreover, it seems Malaysia, which happens to be the site of a regional anti-terrorism center, has not weighed in enough on the lingering (and delay-causing) issue of alleged terrorist links of the MILF. The leader of the “global war on terror,” the US, now has a foot inside this peace process courtesy of the GRP and the MILF, apparently without Malaysia's clearance. For now, the US role, particularly through the US Institute of Peace, is supportive of but peripheral to the negotiations and has mainly taken the form of providing forums for sharing comparative experiences on ancestral domain.

The MILF looks to the US clout more as a guarantor of any peace agreement, especially as far as GRP compliance is concerned. It is no secret that Malaysia would rather exclude non-ASEAN players, particularly the US, whose entry must have been something Malaysia had to grapple with.

Overall, though, Malaysia continues to play a positive role, especially with the seven exploratory talks and the deployment of the IMT under Major General Zulkifeli Mohammad Bin Zain. The breakthrough in the seventh exploratory talks in April 2005, with initial consensus points on the crucial ancestral domain issue, can be partly attributed to the “more exertive results-oriented” facilitation of Malaysia led by Dato' Othman Bin Abd. Razak, Director General of the OPM.

According to MILF peace panel chairman Mohagher Iqbal, Malaysia does not want to risk holding rounds of talks, especially of the formal kind, without assurance of results (referred to in the vernacular as *segurista*), even if this means some delay.

The deployment of the Malaysian-led IMT has revived confidence in the peace process. One sour note, however, has been the conservative Zamboanga City government's refusal to host one of the five IMT Mobile Teams.

Still, even with the IMT in Cen-

tral Mindanao, at least two significant outbreaks of hostilities between certain field units of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the MILF occurred in January 2005. This indicates a few remaining gaps in the ceasefire mechanisms, not necessarily just the IMT, which must continue to be strengthened, preventing *rido* (local clan feuds) from escalating into AFP-MILF hostilities.

A recent Filipino-Malaysian research paper on the IMT cites not only its peacekeeping mission in support of the peace negotiations, but also its role as a good vantage point for understanding the Mindanao conflict from its interaction with civil society. The IMT officers and men additionally serve as "ambassadors of goodwill" for Malaysian diplomacy at the ground level in Mindanao.

GRP peace panel chairman Silvestre Aflado Jr. says both sides are grateful that Malaysia is involved in the "full menu of the peace process." But Malaysia's role for this peace process has yet to reach its full potential. A bigger role can eventually approximate that of Indonesia on behalf of the OIC in the GRP-MNLF peace negotiations, which extended to the post-conflict period of implementation.

For this bigger role, Malaysia should consider upgrading its secretariat for the peace talks to bring in expertise from the relevant line ministries, especially the ministries of foreign affairs and defense, and a more significant role for its embassy in Manila beyond serving as a communication point. There are already indications of this with the recent separate visits to the IMT by Deputy Prime Minister (former Defense Minister) Datuk Seri Mohammad Najib Tun Abdul Razak and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Malaysia has not only the interest or motivation to play a bigger mediator role. It also has the capability, clout, and opportunity to do so. **N**

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# 'Strangers in Our Own

## VARIOUS COUNTRIES' EXPERIENCES WITH ANCESTRAL DOMAIN ARE HELPFUL TO MUSLIMS IN THE PHILIPPINES

EDITOR'S NOTE: These are excerpts from a report that synthesizes the presentations of participants in a meeting in Davao City in May 2005, sponsored by the US Institute of Peace.

BY **ASTRID S. TUMINEZ**

**T**he term "ancestral domain" is not a common international reference, but parsing the phrase into "territory, economic resources, and governance" quickly makes it a familiar concept to minorities around the world.

Referring to the Native American experience, Walter Echo-Hawk, of the Pawnee tribe, alluded to the common experience of "colonialism, loss of homelands, destruction of traditional ways of life and habitat, warfare, disease, and marginalization" as factors that have turned minorities and indigenous peoples in many places into "strangers in our own homeland."

Loss of territory, discrimina-

tion, absence of full citizenship rights, cultural erosion, and violent conflict are common elements in the narrative of many minority groups around the world.

By putting ancestral domain on the table, the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have taken a courageous step. It is a recognition of the need for a long-term strate-

gic solution to the Bangsamoro situation. The GRP and MILF are confronting difficult themes, but they are not doing so in isolation. Others have tackled similarly contentious issues with varying degrees of success. Lessons may be drawn from both successes



## Guideposts: Lessons from International Experience

**A** PEACE TREATY IS ONLY THE BEGINNING.

Often, in lengthy negotiations, negotiators and policymakers fixate on reaching an agreement, devoting less energy to questions of implementation. Specifics of implementation should be tackled as early as possible.

Is an agreement fair and practicable? Do any groups feel coerced into the agreement? Does an arrangement create new minorities? If big questions cannot be resolved, can small but verifiable steps be agreed upon? How can people's expectations be managed? What should be done when, how, by whom, and at what cost?

Because the issues involved in ancestral domain—land, economic resources, and governance—are complex, principals in negotiations must be as specific as possible about the mechanisms, time line, and methods of accountability for implementing an agreement.

**Reconciliation is required for peace.**

The need to change prejudicial mindsets, cultivate mutual sympathy between parties in conflict, and nurture reconciliation is vital. Reconciliation must be emphasized from top to bottom, or from the official negotiating table down to the grassroots.

**Respect at the negotiating table is critical for reconciliation.**

The value of interpersonal relations can be pivotal in promoting reconciliation and gaining critical support for an agreement.

**Ownership of land is not the same as control of resources.**

Inuit experience shows that the absence of formal or legal ownership of land does not preclude control over natural resources.

In the Native American case, tribal lands are held in trust by the US government, but functionally, tribal governments manage these lands as pri-

vate property. Tribes have power to own, manage, and regulate tribal land, water, and natural resources, including those underneath the soil. Tribal governments can also set zoning controls. The US government retains power over the property through taxation, environmental regulation, and other forms of legislation.

Compromise is often necessary in negotiating control over natural resources. In Sudan, the southern Sudanese agreed to a 50-50 sharing arrangement of oil revenues with the North, even though the oil belonged to the South.

**Effective negotiations and governance require unity and professionalism.**

Maoris and Native Americans all offer lessons in intragroup dynamics. Among Maoris, generational and tribal differences exist on governance matters and policy preferences. In governance, Maoris still need to catch up in accounting skills, information technology, and entrepreneurship.



# Own Homeland'



ALEX BALUYUT

and failures elsewhere.

Genuine progress has occurred in the GRP-MILF peace process. The two-year-old ceasefire—guarded by local and international monitoring teams—has enhanced public confidence in the possibility of a lasting peace. Reconcilia-

tion is taking root at various levels, including the grassroots (with the establishment of peace zones) and opinion makers (e.g., the Bishops-Ulama forum and civil society institutions).

Serious international attention is focused on the conflict in

Mindanao, and many outside friends are ready to help during the peace talks and in the potential implementation phase of an agreement. Malaysia is playing a useful role as the official facilitator of talks. The passage and implementation of the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act, while not yet highly applicable to the Bangsamoro ancestral domain, sets a hopeful precedent in the recognition and protection of minority territorial, economic, cultural, and human rights in the Philippines.

Progress in Mindanao indicates that the government and the MILF are forging their own "best practices" in confidence-building and conflict management. They could learn from international experience, but should stand ready in the future to share their success with other groups and countries that are in conflict.

## GETTING TO YES

They also need to address remaining substantive challenges. The first set of challenges is technical and legal and involves the details of "getting to yes" on ancestral domain. Clearly, most of Moro ancestral domain can no longer be restored. What forms of compensation can be offered instead of land?

Compensation does not necessarily mean cash. Besides Philippine government resources, which are meager, can outside friends of the Philippines as well as Philippine business interests be convinced to assist in Bangsamoro development as a form of compensation? What democratic procedures—including a referendum or charter change toward federalism—might be considered, and how can they be appropriately structured to address the needs and wishes of the Moro majority?

The second set of challenges is operational and has to do with implementation. Few in the Philippines would aspire to the same level of implementation that characterized the 1976 and 1996 peace agreements in Mindanao. What can be done to ensure a more robust, punctual, and verifiable implementation of an ancestral domain agreement and a subsequent political settlement? What can the GRP, MILF, civil society, and outside actors do now to preempt potential spoilers? How can post-agreement violence be prevented?

In the Bangsamoro community, unity is needed among a critical mass of leaders and their constituents. A peace agreement, no matter how beautifully framed, will not work if the situation on the ground

Internal unity has also been a challenge to Native Americans. Historically, weak tribal alliances and intense inter-tribal warfare caused Native Americans to succumb to the "divide and conquer" strategies of European colonizers. Today, unity can sometimes remain elusive among the 500 federally recognized tribes that have separate governments, constitutional documents, and procedures.

### Outsiders can be helpful.

Outside friends can catalyze agreements on ancestral domain and peace. In Bougainville, the assistance of New Zealand, Australia, and the Pacific Island Forum helped lead to the 2001 peace agreement and continues to contribute to the agreement's implementation.

In Northern Ireland, powerful outsiders such as the US, the UK, the European Union, and the Republic of Ireland were indispensable to the success of negotiations and implementation. These outsiders guided the peace process and brought in critically

needed grants and investments. They provided good offices for negotiations. They delivered technical assistance, especially on controversial matters that the parties in conflict would have found difficult to resolve themselves.

### A good agreement keeps the grandchildren in mind.

A serious approach to ancestral domain and peace must shun the temptation to gain short-term tactical advantages to the detriment of longer term, strategic solutions.

### Opportunities for self-help must be seized.

Minority groups must create and seize opportunities to help themselves while long-term arrangements on territory, economic resources, and governance are being negotiated.

### Thinking beyond labels can be constructive.

Labels such as secession, self-de-

termination, territorial integrity, federalism, autonomy, free association, and independence can be loaded with negative connotations. It may be useful for parties in conflict to think beyond labels and focus on underlying, fundamental interests.

What are the most important matters in negotiating ancestral domain? The first is societal consensus: any agreement reached must have sufficient public support. The second is accommodation—and even celebration—of differences. Compromises are possible to meet the underlying needs of each side. It is also important to appreciate and nurture the cultural and historical legacies of minority groups because these enrich the national fabric.

Third, the goal of "unity in diversity" and full citizenship for all inhabitants of a state must be paramount. When minority identities are acknowledged and accepted, and when minorities feel they have the same rights

as other citizens, a peaceful and stable state becomes possible.

### You cannot please everyone, but fight a good fight.

Ancestral domain settlements can become problematic if they create new oppressed minorities or provide fodder for big spoilers.

There is no substitute for effective political leadership; a minority group must be articulate in making its petitions; drafting agreements using internationally accepted principles appeals to a broader public; and international allies, including foundations and intellectual communities, can play a supportive role.

—Astrid S. Tuminez

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is mired in violent dynamics.

The third challenge is perhaps the most difficult: how can national reconciliation or a massive change of heart and mind be effected? Observers of the Moro experience can attest to the deep prejudice from which Moros have suffered for centuries and continue to confront daily. Bad blood between Muslims and Christians from the colonial era has been revived by battles of the past few decades.

At stake are not short-term interests, but the future of Moro and Christian children and the international reputation of the Philippine government and society.

For too long, the conflict in Mindanao has hurt individuals, communities, and the entire country. At this juncture, forces for peace must focus on reconciliation. Priests, ulamas, civil society organizers, historians, teachers, youth leaders, military commanders, guerillas, civil servants, celebrities, and all interested parties must work to change prejudicial attitudes and mutual threat perceptions between the majority Christian and minority Moro populations of the Philippines.

A crying need exists, in the words of a Philippine historian, to "create a new generation with as little bias as possible." If this effort succeeds, the Moros will no longer feel like "strangers in their own homeland." A transformed, stable, and prosperous Mindanao for all groups living in it can become reality.

## US, NEW ZEALAND

Many indigenous peoples have lost their ancestral and traditional lands. Native Americans in the United States lost the armed conflict against white settlers and consequently lost their lands and way of life. However, their forefathers left a legacy of legal, cultural, and political rights embodied in 500 treaties signed between the US federal government and Native American tribes.

Today, Native Americans have jurisdiction over 90 million acres of land. The US government has trustee status and retains legal title to the land, but the tribes have civil and criminal jurisdiction over their territories, run their own tribal governments, own the water and minerals on and under the land, and significantly control de-

cisions regarding development. Although tribes still face challenges in safeguarding their rights and control over traditional territories, they have recourse to courts, Congress, and public opinion to protect their interests.

The Maoris of New Zealand also suffered when European colonial policies and military conflict destroyed their traditional laws and collective land tenure and ownership. They signed the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 with European settlers, but the Europeans violated the treaty's provisions on Maori rights, possessions, and citizenship. Maoris lost control of their lands over time and saw traditional cultural structures erode.

However, in the past two decades, Maori culture has enjoyed a renaissance. A rethinking of the

years, shares the Inuit experience. Inuit, who number 155,000 worldwide, are an indigenous people who have been colonized by five countries: Great Britain, Canada, Russia, Denmark, and the United States. In Canada, Inuit number approximately 55,000.

They retained "aboriginal title" to their lands because, unlike other indigenous peoples in North America, they had not signed treaties ceding their land and natural resources to the government. The Canadian government was unconcerned about Inuit aboriginal titles until oil and gas exploration and other development on Inuit land became an issue.

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ALEX BALDIUT

Waitangi Treaty has occurred in New Zealand, leading to a process that allows Maoris to assert claims for breaches of the treaty and seek restoration of their tribal lands.

Martin Mariassouce, a Maori, noted that the Maoris have managed to arrest their people's cultural and economic decline, but still face many challenges. These include pursuing remaining land and intellectual property claims, improving the socioeconomic lot of their people, developing entrepreneurial and management skills, and becoming competitive in such fields as information technology and tourism.

## CANADA, SRI LANKA

Terry Fenge, a consultant who worked on Inuit negotiations with the Canadian government for 10

years, shares the Inuit experience. Inuit, who number 155,000 worldwide, are an indigenous people who have been colonized by five countries: Great Britain, Canada, Russia, Denmark, and the United States. In Canada, Inuit number approximately 55,000.

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with Inuit in 1973 that resulted in four comprehensive land claims agreements. The Tamils of Sri Lanka, who have traditionally populated the north and east of the country, have a land grievance sparked by their minoritization in the east. Jehan Perera, a Sri Lankan peace advocate, said that the eastern portion of Sri Lanka used to be 60 percent Tamil, but that percentage decreased to 40 percent in the 1980s due to Sinhalese settlement. Resolution of Tamil grievances related to land, language, governance, and other matters is still a work in progress.

Although the Tamils and the majority Sinhalese subscribe to an ongoing ceasefire, a comprehensive agreement is not yet in sight. Federalism has been proposed as

a resolution to the conflict, but the two sides have put forward different and irreconcilable versions. The Tamil guerillas, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, have proposed an interim self-governing authority on Tamil lands, but the Sinhalese government believes this is overreaching. In the meantime, the devastation wrought by the tsunami of December 2004 (which killed 40,000 people) created an opportunity for the Tamils to pursue relief and reconstruction efforts over a specified, limited territory, working with both the government and Muslim parties. This development could be a harbinger of a more constructive path toward Tamil self-government and an end to the devastating conflict in Sri Lanka.

## NATIONHOOD AND CITIZENSHIP

In addition to land, the problem of nationhood and citizenship is at the heart of ancestral domain claims. Many minorities have fought for their own territory and governance structures because they have never felt themselves members of a cohesive nation or full citizens of the state in which they lived.

Ambassador Francis Deng, former Sudanese minister for foreign affairs and former special representative of the UN secretary-general on internally displaced peoples, remarked that in his 12 years as a UN special envoy, he had observed many deeply divided countries "in desperate need to build cohesive nations." A central task for states is to create a country where all groups have a sense of pride and belonging. Stability and peace are most likely in cohesive nations where minorities enjoy the rights of full citizenship.

Sudan illustrates the problem of a divided nation. Arabization, Islamization, and enslavement were the central dynamics that led to a divided North and South. People in the North who were Muslims, Arabic-speaking, and could claim Arab culture and descent were, in Deng's words, "elevated to a position of respect and dignity," while "a non-Muslim black African was deemed inferior, a heathen, and a legitimate target of enslavement."

The first war in Sudan, which started in 1955, ended in 1972 with autonomy granted to the South.



But autonomy could not work as long as the national government was making decisions in which the southern Sudanese had no voice. The abrogation of autonomy by the North provoked renewed violence. Today, despite a signed peace agreement, in which the South will have its own government and army and participate more equitably at the national level, Sudan continues to face challenges in creating national cohesion.

North and South have temporarily put aside their differences, but if the experiment of nation-building fails, the Sudanese peace agreement allows the South to decide after a six-year interim period whether to remain in a united Sudan or to secede.

Inuit and Native Americans have experienced different challenges of nationhood and citizenship, but both groups are relatively well integrated into their states. Inuit, despite being a minority beset by social ills and displaced by modernity and urbanization, have always been proud Canadians. Secession is not on the Inuit agenda.

Within the context of a sovereign and united Canada, Inuit were able to negotiate arrangements that enhanced their rights and benefits as Canadian citizens. Native Americans in the US have fought over time for equality with the larger American society, but, in Echo-Hawk's words, accept that they are "not going anywhere, that the US is their home."

Native Americans want respect for their traditions and identity and have worked for "true dual citizenship," that is, to be free to belong to their own tribe and also to the United States as citizens. Their struggle has focused on getting their rights recognized, enhancing their prospects for prosperity like other Americans, and exercising their right to self-government over their lands and people without interference from state and local authorities.

Native Americans enjoy sovereign status as "domestic dependent nations," but Congress has tremendous power to limit or redefine their rights. Thus, the struggle for justice continues, but Native Americans are reassured that American society is moving (albeit slowly) toward appreciation and respect for the rights of its native peoples. **N**

# Eyes on the Marsh

REBELS, GOVERNMENT, AND BUSINESS ARE IN A CONTEST OVER RESOURCE-RICH LIGUASAN

**F**or whom is Liguasan Marsh's development? On February 19, 2003, three days after the military declared that the war in "Buliok Complex" in Liguasan Marsh was "over," President Arroyo announced that an oil palm plantation would soon rise in the erstwhile battleground.

It was a war the military earlier claimed was against the Pentagon kidnap-for-ransom gang but later admitted was against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Buliok is really just a barangay with one part in the town of Pagalungan, Maguindanao, and another part across the river, in Pikit, North Cotabato. But the late Salamat Hashim, then chair of the MILF, was reportedly staying on the Pagalungan side where an Islamic Center, referred to by the military as Hashim's "mansion" although it obviously couldn't be classified as one, was set up.

The military dubbed Buliok a "complex" and also called it "the second Camp Abubakar." The sprawling Camp Abubakar in the Maguindanao towns of Matanog and Barira, among others, was the main camp of the MILF until the Estrada administration's "all-out war."

The resource-rich marsh comprises about 288,000 hectares straddling 19 towns in three provinces, Maguindanao, North Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat. It is a site of major importance for biodiversity conservation and in 1992 was recommended for protection under the Philippines' National Protected Areas System Act.

Liguasan is also home to an estimated one million inhabitants, most of them the Moro people whose lives and rituals are linked with the marsh.

## PALM OIL

Arroyo's dream plantation is just one of several projects she has been eyeing to transform Buliok and nearby barangays into a "peaceful and bustling agricultural community." Tasked by the President to work out a "comprehen-

sive peace and development program" was Eduardo Ermita, then Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process. She instructed Ermita to "accelerate talks with investors from the Middle East who are keen on helping develop this fertile area."

She said the establishment of an oil palm plantation in Buliok was to be bankrolled by the Khaddafi Foundation in Libya. She added that the foundation's local partner would be the National Development Corp.

Very soon, the Office of the Press Secretary quoted Mrs. Arroyo as saying, an investment decision might be concluded, as she noted government's readiness to put up the initial seed fund for the palm oil project.

In naming Ermita, Arroyo apparently forgot that her government peace panel signed agreements with the MILF in June and August 2001 and on May 7, 2002, allowing the MILF to "determine, lead and manage rehabilitation and development projects in the areas affected by the conflict."

As of December 2005, the palm oil plantation and Mrs. Arroyo's other promises have re-

mained promises.

Four months after Mrs. Arroyo's promises, junior officers who led the July 27, 2003 mutiny in Oakwood, Makati City, alleged that the development of Liguasan Marsh was part of Oplan Greenbase, a document the government says is "spurious" but which the junior officers insisted to be true.

## SECRET PLAN?

The junior officers said that among the objectives of Greenbase was "to clear the Liguasan Marsh Area so that the development projects can be implemented as concessions to the Libyans and Malaysians in exchange for their participation in the (government-MILF) peace talks."

"The Liguasan Marsh area has been cleared and government has not made secret its plans to get the Malaysians and the Libyans involved in its development. It likewise already made public announcements regarding the direct involvement of Libya and Malaysia in the GRP-MILF peace talks," the junior officer's statement read.

On October 24 that same year, then Environment Secretary Elisea Gozun announced in a Mindanao-wide radio forum that the Department of Environment and Natural Resources was undertaking a study to tap the natural gas in Liguasan Marsh. Gozun said she personally visited the area and saw the "potential and a feasibility study is needed and we will propose a budget for the development of the said natural gas."

Gozun said Liguasan is a potential source of natural gas "which can eventually reduce the country's importation of petroleum from Arab countries."

## INVESTORS, TOO

In July 2004, Sen. Manuel Roxas III urged both government and the MILF to "fast track" the peace process to hasten the development of untapped natural resources in Mindanao, particularly

**WHAT WILL BE THE IMPACT OF A PEACE AGREEMENT WITH THE MILF ON THE COMPETITION FOR THE MARSH?**

the oil deposits in Liguasan Marsh. Roxas, former trade secretary, said the continuing volatile peace and order situation in the area has been driving away potential investors from pursuing the project along the Liguasan Marsh.

"We really need to continue the exploration and development of our oil deposits but we have to fix the peace and order problems first," Roxas said in Davao City. Without a negotiated peace settlement, Roxas said it would be difficult for the government to seek investments of at least US\$1 billion for the development of the Liguasan Marsh deposits.

The Philippine National Oil Company-Exploration Corp. (PNOC-EC) had earlier declared it found oil and gas deposits in the area and proposed immediate drilling operations. The deposits were found in Barangay Lagao in Lambayong, Sultan Kudarat. Local officials said the "black" or crude oil deposits in Lambayong are estimated at 561 million barrels, second in terms of volume to the Malampaya deposits in Palawan.

Natural gas deposits were also found by PNOC-EC in Barangay Tukanakudden in Sultan sa Barongis, Maguindanao but the drilling was suspended since the "all-out war" in 2000.

Roxas said the country needs to develop Liguasan Marsh deposits to offset its present oil needs. So far, he said Malampaya supplies only less than 10 percent of the country's oil needs, with the bulk of current supplies coming from oil-producing countries.

"It would be a big help if we can tap these deposits because the reality is that we cannot stop the prices of imported oil from increasing. From \$25 per barrel two years ago, it's now \$45 and still increasing," he said in July 2004, adding that local prices are expected to stabilize if the deposits in the marshland are tapped.

The Philippines is currently at least 50 percent dependent on oil, down from 75 percent in the 1990s and 100 percent during the 1970s.

## DEVELOPMENT PLANS

Liguasan Marsh has been the subject of a flurry of development plans since the days of Ferdinand Marcos. He organized the Southern Philippines Development Authority to spearhead, among others, a study on the potentials of the marsh.



JOE GALVEZ

The National Economic and Development Authority regional office in the late 1990s made a Comprehensive Development Plan for the Marsh and organized the Liguasan Marsh Development Council headed by Cotabato Governor Emmanuel Pinol.

In July 2000, shortly after the military declared it had overrun the MILF's Camp Abubakar, residents told a fact-finding mission organized by the Federation of Reporters for Empowerment and Equality, and the Mindanao Institute of Journalism, that they feared the Estrada administration's "all-out war" was intended to drive them away from the marsh so the development plan could be implemented unhampered.

Two people's organizations had spearheaded protest actions against the development plans in the Marsh. In late 2002, the groups staged a rally in Cotabato City, protesting the plan to build the Pulangi Dam in Pulangi river, a major tributary of the Rio Grande de Mindanao, the longest river in Mindanao. Pulangui drains into Liguasan Marsh.

Mike Haron, spokesperson of the Integrated Mindanaons Association of Natives, said then that they were opposing the construction of the Pulangi Dam as their

study shows it would submerge 3,000 hectares of productive agricultural land and flood some 70,000 hectares covering portions of Pikit, Kabacan, and Carmen towns of North Cotabato and Pagalungan and Pagagawan towns of Maguindanao if it overflows.

Aside from the Pulangi Dam, the development plan for Liguasan Marsh that NEDA-12 drafted includes a fish cannery, a fishport and eco-tourism. The marsh is the biggest source of freshwater fish in Mindanao and its rare species and wildlife offer "unlimited potentials for eco-tourism."

Haron says an international airport that would be built in a portion of Pinol's hometown, Mlang (part of the marshland) is also part of the plans. He said a private organization conducted an exploration and concluded that the best source of mineral water could be found within the marsh.

## PEACE AGREEMENT

Haron's questions in late 2002, two months before the government attacked Liguasan, remains a valid question today, when both government and the MILF are optimistic that a peace agreement will be forged soon: "By then, who will enjoy that so-called development if the people within the marsh will all be displaced? For

whom is the development that they are talking about?"

In a 2004 research project titled "Casualties of Globalization: Economic Interest, War, and Displacement of Indigenous Communities in Liguasan Marsh," authors Janet M. Arnado, associate professor at De La Salle University and her research associate-sister Mary Ann M. Arnado, deputy director of the Initiatives for International Dialogue and convenor of the Mindanao Peoples' Caucus, concluded that based on their data analysis, "We see an apparent, though not transparent relationship, between the February 2003 Buliok war and economic interest in Liguasan Marsh."

But the Arnado sisters noted that the relationship is "highly complex" as there are other bases for armed conflict in the area, "foremost is the long-standing Bangsamoro struggle for self determination."

"We conclude that the recurrent attacks along the Liguasan Marsh to purge rebellion have been exploited," they said, "as a convenient excuse for going to war, in order to advance economic interest [of government and business] over the immense deposit of natural gas and oil and agri-business plantations."

— MindaNews



# My Father Is My Enemy

FORMER SEPARATIST GUERRILLAS  
HAVE JOINED THE ARMY, FIGHTING  
AGAINST THEIR OWN

BY JULIE S. ALIPALA *in Sulu*

**H**e was once a rebel sympathizer, a favorite son of a foreign-trained rebel leader based in Panamao, Sulu. Now he is a trusted soldier of the state, running after Nur Misuari's renegade followers, among them his own father.

Army Private First Class Yasser Abdulla, 29, is one of around 1,000 former rebels in this province—birthplace of the Muslim rebellion—who are now assigned to Army battalions. Their integration was part of the package granted the erstwhile underground Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) when it signed a peace agreement with government in 1996.

When we came here in June 2005, it wasn't difficult to find Abdulla. His story stands out for its irony: while he had joined the Army, his father, 60-year-old Jannier Yasser, remained on the

other side of the battlefield. Yasser belongs to a renegade group that has been demanding the release of Misuari, the former MNLF leader who had brought his organization to the negotiating table

only to rebel against the state again later. In February, they were among those who attacked military camps here that led to a prolonged gun battle with the Army and Marines.

"Of course I'm torn between respecting my father's principles and our loyalty to the AFP (Armed Forces of the Philippines), but their group committed unlawful acts that even caused the death of our commander (Lt. Col. Dennis Villanueva)," Abdulla told NEWSBREAK in Filipino.

Abdulla finished Grade 3 before he joined the MNLF. He belongs to the first batch of MNLF integreees who joined the military in 1997. Life is better for him now, he says. With a monthly pay of P13,000, he can send his kids to school—a far cry from the years when he had to scrounge for food. Yet, he was constantly bothered by the fact that he and his father were on opposing sides. He thought of quitting the Army, but his father himself told him he was better off as a soldier.

Integration had been a sensitive issue in the government-MNLF peace talks. Both sides feared that it would create more problems than solve them, given their history of bloodbath. For 30 years, the MNLF waged a separatist rebellion that saw the bloodiest battles in the Philippines' post-colonial history. It ended in a peace agreement in 1996, which, among others, created the Southern Phil-

ippines Council for Peace and Development and caused the integration of 5,000 MNLF rebels into the AFP and about the same number into the Philippine National Police. The agreement was preceded by the election of Misuari as governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

The actual strength of MNLF integreees in the enlisted service of the Army is 4,348, according to Army records. To this day, the Army encounters the usual problems that come with integration. There are cases involving combatants who join the Army, enjoy its benefits, borrow money from it, then abandon it. But these are more the exceptions than the rule, according to Army officers.

In 1997, the Army set up a training directorate to facilitate the transition for both sides. Two officers involved in the program are now based in this province, Lt. Col. Pablo Lorenzo, commander of the 35<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion (IB) and Lt. Col. Emmanuel Sison of the 53<sup>rd</sup> IB. Both officers say that integration has come a long way since it was first introduced.

The 53<sup>rd</sup> IB, which is based in Maimbung, has two former rebels holding crucial positions: lieutenants Julistidi Arasid and Walid Kee. At age 44, Arasid is a company commander, while Kee—previously head of battalion intelligence—is now chief for civil-military operations. They get a base pay of P20,000 a month, enough to



send their kids to decent schools.

Arasid joined the MNLF in 1979 after finishing high school. In 1997, he enlisted as an integree in the Philippine Army and got a scholarship that allowed him to finish a political science course at the Western Mindanao State University in Zamboanga City. "Without the peace agreement, I would not have been able to finish college," Arasid said.

Kee was a representative of the MNLF in Saudi Arabia from 1982 to 1984. He organized Filipinos there and recruited them to the MNLF. He eventually returned here and was commissioned in the Army in 1999.

"My experience as intelligence officer taught me some lessons on how to play an active role in conflict management and resolution, but at the same time, it is very challenging because we have to be very cautious and sensitive, or else you might be the cause of senseless war," Kee said in a reflective tone.

He's focused on building relationships with the community to help the military gain the trust and respect of the locals. He's proud of the fact that in his area of operation in Talipao, "not a single Misuari follower here" joined the February attack.

When almost all the troops of the 35<sup>th</sup> IB reinforced the other units in February at Panamao, leaving a skeletal force in Talipao, Kee said their headquarters in Bayog Hill remained untouched and protected. "In fact it was the community who provided us with a buffer, and when [rebel forces]



withdrew, they never passed through Talipao," Kee added.

Integrees make no bones about their biggest motivation for joining the Army, which is to have a better life.

Private First Class Maing Arajam is 70 years old and a former rebel. He said he would rather sweep garbage and clean the Army camp here than go back to the jungles and fight. When he was with the MNLF, he was getting a P500 monthly allowance, which made him heavily indebted. Why would he go back to that life when in the Army he's now getting P13,000 a month? "Now I don't have any debts. I can send my children to school."

Arajam is suffering from rheumatism, but he bragged that he could still fight it out with the last man—if and when the camp is attacked. He is a sentry of the 104<sup>th</sup> Army Brigade in Bus-bus, Jolo town.

A former spiritual adviser of the

MNLF, Sahiri Maulana is now a private with the 35<sup>th</sup> IB. He admits that some soldiers still have biases against Muslims like him. "If they get drunk, their biases against us would show. We just ignore them." But he points out that once they're in the battlefield, all is forgotten.

Another integree admitted that he almost abandoned his post when their former commander maltreated them. In fact, there was even talk that it was the MNLF integrees who tipped off the rebels about Lt. Col. Villanueva, who was killed at the height of the February attacks—a rumor that even Army officers found baseless and unfair.

Sison, who took over as commander of the 53<sup>th</sup> battalion after Villanueva's death, says he has no reason to doubt the loyalty of the integrees under him, including Abdulla, whose father was fighting for the other side.

"Their loyalty is priceless, their commitment is immeasurable, and I have never doubted their loyalty to the government," Sison told NEWSBREAK. Formerly training director of the first batch of integrees, he experienced firsthand how loyal they could be when his mother was hospitalized in Manila in 1997.

It was sheer coincidence that at the time, he was with the integrees in Manila because they were invited for a parade in Camp Aguinaldo. "We needed 10 donors for blood, so I left the trainees in the camp and attended to my mother in the hospital," Sison recalled.

At the hospital, his trainees showed up, all willing to donate blood. "Among Muslims, they would consider it *haram* [against the Koran] when you take something precious and sacred from

## INTEGREGES MAKE NO BONES ABOUT THEIR BIGGEST MOTIVATION FOR JOINING THE ARMY: TO HAVE A BETTER LIFE.

your body," Sison said. But this obviously didn't matter to the trainees. "I was really overwhelmed when all, meaning a battalion-size of that batch, volunteered to donate blood. My mother survived for several months because of the donation from our Muslim brothers."

When he conducts patrols outside the camp, Sison prefers to be with the integrees. "I feel safe and protected," he said. He has asked his men to be sensitive to the Muslim culture; as such, they don't eat pork at the mess. Breaks are also provided to allow Muslim soldiers to do their prayers.

On the other hand, the 35<sup>th</sup> IB has close to 200 integrees under the command of Lt. Col. Pablo Lorenzo, or 40 percent of his battalion. He relies on Kee for information on security matters. A first-timer in Sulu, Lorenzo was a member of the Army's training directorate for integration and this experience helped him adjust well with his Muslim troops. "I see that they have assimilated into the system, so I don't doubt their loyalty."

He acknowledged that non-Christian soldiers are "very passionate with their culture and religion, so we try to identify common ground and for me, I make a conscious effort to have an intimate knowledge of the situation and the people, appreciation of their good deeds and impose firm disciplinary actions if they really committed serious mistakes."

"Now all I can say is, I can eat, mingle, and sleep with my former enemies," Lorenzo said. However, he admitted that "though we've gone a long way, more work, more challenges face us here at the AFP." **N**

## The Army's Outreach Program

FOR SEVERAL YEARS NOW, THE PAARAL PROGRAM HAS GIVEN FORMER rebels an opportunity to go back to school. The Philippine Army Assistance to Rural Advancement on Literacy (PAARAL) was put up to facilitate the integration of former MNLF guerrillas within the context of the peace agreement. It's a continuing non-formal education for elementary and high school dropouts, in coordination with the Department of Education and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority. Army soldiers serve as teachers and trainers.

In Sulu, about 400 integrees have availed of themselves the PAARAL program and will graduate in February 2006. This would allow unschooled former rebels to compete for promotion as well. The course is completed in 800 hours and will make them equivalent to high school graduates.

The modules for PAARAL include English, Mathematics, Social Science, Critical Thinking, and Global Awareness. For primary education, the basics are offered: Reading, Writing, Math.

Brig. Gen. Alexander Aleo, commander of the Army's 104<sup>th</sup> brigade in Sulu, sees hope in the non-Christian soldiers "because they really showed their willingness to be accepted, they also compete and work hard to become regular soldiers." —**Julie S. Alipala**





# Schools as Armories

AT THE HEIGHT OF BATTLE, THE MILITARY CONVERTS PUBLIC SCHOOLS INTO CAMPS

BY JULIE S. ALIPALA in Sulu

**C**hildren of war have memories different from ours. For 11-year-old Darma Tadjii, some of her memorable moments in school were the times the soldiers came and used it as their camp.

Speaking in a tone that bordered between fear and excitement, Tadjii recalled how the soldiers loaded mortars in their howitzer. “One, two, three, fire!” she mimicked them. A deafening noise followed as the ground shook, like in a mild tremor, Tadjii said. Afterward, she saw the smoke-filled empty mortar shell. Tadjii witnessed this “thrilling scene” six times that day before her mother asked her to go home.

“There were other children watching too, although we were always shooed away by the soldiers. But we kept on returning to watch the loading and firing of mortars,” Tadjii said in mixed Filipino and Tausug.

Tadjii was talking about those days in February 2005, in her school, the Indanan National High School in Barangay Lampaki, Indanan town. The school is located in a residential area, along the main

highway that leads to the interior towns of Maimbung and Talipao.

The military uses the school as “temporary bases for emergency purposes,” said Eufremio Canaria, Sulu’s education supervisor. Schooling in eight public schools in the towns of Parang, Panamao, and Indanan were temporarily suspended last February 2005, when soldiers were locked in a prolonged gun battle with armed groups.

This is by no means new. Children and their education are usually the first casualties of war. But in this province, it pains one to see that even schools—cramped and dilapidated as they are—are converted into camps at the height of the battles. They are usually strategically located and built like camps in a way—fenced, with shelter, and the earth as floor.

On a bad day, the schools are damaged by gunfire. It is usually the soldiers themselves who volunteer to rebuild it later, though this usually takes time.

Army M/Sgt. Paulino Boca admitted to NEWSBREAK that when about 200 armed followers of Nur Misuari attacked his team, they set up a temporary detachment inside Siit Elementary School following reports that the rebels were “planning to attack some vital points.” The school had been closed to students by that time.

When the town of Panamao was under siege by the rebels during the same period, the Marines had to occupy the Panglima Agga El-

ementary School and the adjoining Panamao National High School. They surrounded the walls with concrete wire, occupied a number of classrooms, and used some as temporary storage for their artilleries.

In Indanan, the 104<sup>th</sup> Army Brigade converted the Lampaki school ground as their main base of operation, artillery storage, and support firing base. Sulu overall commander Brig. Gen. Alexander Aleo explained that they occupied schools only after they had been vacated by students and with the approval of barangay officials.

But Canaria claimed the military failed to coordinate with them before using the school ground. “Actually, *walang permiso* or coordination. We tried to contact the military. Their reason then was that the Lampaki school was in a very strategic position for their artillery fire. Since it was an emergency case, we just granted them a temporary stay,” Canaria explained.

Col. Juancho Sabban, commander of the Marine brigade here, admitted that for lack of time “and in an emergency situation,” they failed to coordinate with Department of Education officials.

Yet, both military and education officials acknowledge the harm that these things can do to children. “Definitely, it’s not good, especially when children are exposed to military hardware,” Aleo said. However, knowing the culture of the Tausugs, children’s exposure to military operations or weapons “is not something new, they are already accustomed to it,” Aleo added.

Canaria said they received feedback from the communities that children exposed to military hardware are suffering from skin diseases. Echoing Aleo’s statement, however, Canaria said “children are already used to such artillery fire, but what thrilled them was seeing huge shells because they wanted to get them.”

Warina Jukuy, the representative of Sulu Civil Society Assembly (Kaput-Swara), said it’s a common occurrence for the military in Sulu to use schools as the main base for their operations “because schools are considered neutral ground.”

“Whether the intention is good or bad, they are committing violations of international humanitarian law. Schools are considered non-combatant areas,” Jukuy said. **N**

# The Americans Never Left Sulu

THEY USED TO OWN PLANTATIONS AND RAN SCHOOLS IN THE PROVINCE

BY JULIE S. ALIPALA *in Sulu*

**T**he Americans have long conquered Sulu—in harmless ways.

Thus, when we visited the province in the middle of 2005 amid talk that American troops were planning to hold military exercises here, we were not surprised that the governor, Benjamin Loong, dismissed local opposition to the plan. After all, while the history of American colonization in the Philippines is replete with blood, it also has the other side: the sweeteners that were offered to appease the locals.

Loong chooses to remember the latter. Since after the end of World War II, he said, the Americans have helped the people of Sulu.

Americans used to run coconut plantations in the town of Talipao. For close to 30 years, Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) guerrillas stayed in and harvested a coconut plantation in Bayog Hill in Barangay Samak, Talipao. Berton Thompson, a Filipino American whose family lives in Zamboanga City, used to own the plantation, which is now the headquarters of the Army's 35<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion (IB). The farm is now being managed by a corporation based in Sulu, says Lt. Col. Pablo Lorenzo, the battalion commander.

Beyond plantations, Americans made their influence felt by running Catholic schools in this Muslim-dominated province. Oblates of Mary Immaculate priest Romeo Saniel, president of Notre Dame College of Jolo, said American missionaries ran the school 51 years ago. The first five presidents of Notre Dame school were Americans.

"They are no longer around, but the influence is still there," said Saniel, showing the school's American Studies and Resource Center, which former US Ambassador to the Philippines Francis Ricciardone visited last summer.

But the projects that had the most impact as far as the Americans are concerned are those initiated by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) after the signing of the

peace agreement between the government and the MNLF in 1996. The projects are aimed at helping rebels return to the mainstream.

Now on its final stage, the USAID-funded Livelihood Enhancement and Peace Program (LEAP) has benefited 28,000 former MNLF combatants. Under the program, they were taught to grow rice or corn or get involved in trading, according to Noel Ruiz, the program manager. Other projects funded by USAID and supervised by the Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) community's small infrastructure projects (CIP) involved water systems, warehouses, solar dryers, boat landings, culverts, community centers, bridges and road upgrading and mid-scale infrastructure programs undertaking critically needed projects like ports, road, and major improvements on bridges.

Education is the focus of the primary project. The Computer Literacy and Internet Connection was put up in eight selected secondary and primary schools, while the Education Awareness Support Effort was established in six schools.

## WATER AS TARGET

Sulu's partnership with GEM has resulted in the successful implementation of 28 CIP projects in Sulu which improved the lives of about 45,000 beneficiaries. Construction of 12 more CIP projects for 33,000 residents is expected to be finished this year.

During his visit here last April 2005, Ricciardone reported that GEM's Anuling Water System in Patikul provided potable water to 8,635 residents.

Unfortunately, the water system in the island has "always been the target of lawless elements," said Lt. Col. Emmanuel Sison, commanding officer of the 53<sup>rd</sup> IB based in Maimbung town.

Sison told NEWSBREAK that after the February 2005 attack in Sulu, the Abu Sayyaf Group or alleged Misuari followers have targeted the water system because "we too are benefiting from it. A number of soldiers were killed, either directly ambushed or victimized through landmines."

Despite setbacks to some established infrastructure projects, other US-funded nongovernment organizations (NGOs) continued to pour assistance. The Alliance for Mindanao Off-Grid Renewable Energy, in partnership with Mirant Philippines and Winrock International, established 18 solar power projects in Sulu, bringing light to 500 households. Ricciardone said the US government was ready to put up another 70 solar renewable energy projects.

According to Loong, out of 200 programmed projects for Mindanao, USAID allotted 70 for Sulu alone. "It only shows that the US government is serious in helping Sulu. Where on earth could you find NGOs that establish projects in Sulu with all the negative impressions from these lawless elements?" Loong said.

## TRICKLE-DOWN EFFECT

The question remains: Are the multi-million dollar projects benefiting local residents?

Loong believes that not all US-funded projects for Sulu have been implemented properly. "It may not be properly maintained or sustained," he added. The governor said he has no way to double-check all the projects in his province. Although several assessments have been undertaken since 1997, Loong said he has not been fur-

nished copies of the reports by the previous administration.

Patikul Mayor Esmon Suhuri, then a vice mayor during the time of former Sulu governor Yusup Jikiri, said he was not even aware that the projects in Sulu were funded by the Americans. "We are more focused on the peace and order problem than finding out who were the donors of the projects," Suhuri told NEWSBREAK.

When fighting between Misuari loyalists and the military erupted in Panamao town in February 2005, USAID development projects for former MNLF combatants were hit hard.

Ruiz said most of those who joined Ustadz Habier Malik in the attack against military installations were direct beneficiaries of LEAP: "So it has simply gone to waste, but we learned our lessons."

Most of the projects "in full swing" then were the seaweed farms, fishing, trading, and some infrastructure like warehouses. But Loong dismissed Ruiz's revelations as "just minor losses."

Curiously, billboards of all USAID partner-NGOs do not display the agency's logo.

Lt. Col. Michael Donnelly, public affairs officer of the Joint Special Operations Task Force Philippines based in Camp Aguinaldo, said it would be difficult for Sulu residents to appreciate US support "when they don't see USAID logo together or incorporated with the partner organizations when they establish projects in Sulu."

An official from a USAID partner told Donnelly that displaying any US logo in the area might be an invitation to an "attack or harassment."

But Lt. Greg Wilson, head of an American mission to Sulu, and his team had a different experience.

## SULU MISSION

Last May, Wilson led a team of 27 American military experts to Jolo, Sulu, for a 10-day mission. The trip was announced only a day before the team's departure.

"We want to determine the real

MANY OF THE US-FUNDED PROJECTS HAVE GONE TO WASTE DUE TO THE ON-AC





**NO HIDDEN AGENDA?:**  
American soldiers with Sulu residents

needs of the people in the area and how we could help them," Wilson said.

Targeted for assessment were barangays known to be frequented by Abu Sayyaf members and recently attacked by Misuari followers. These included the towns of Panamao, Patikul, Maimbung, Talipao, and Indanan.

Queried several times by local reporters in Zamboanga City and in Jolo about their real mission, Wilson repeatedly said that "we are here for barangay assessment."

Journalists told Wilson that the Americans could just get data from local government officials and not put their lives at risk by going to conflict-ridden areas. To this, the head of the US mission said, "we already got hold of their documents for our use... We are experts and trained in such situations. Our team specializes in humanitarian missions. Besides, we have gotten all the necessary documentation from USAID partners that will help us in coming up with a comprehensive assessment."

Wilson added that his team is "culture-sensitive" and could speak the local dialect.

There was apprehension

among residents when word got around that Americans were arriving in Sulu. After all, there's also an anti-American sentiment among some locals here. Jolo town councilor Cocoy Tulawie, a member of the Sulu Civil Society Assembly, feared the revival of the century-old anti-American sentiment. "What if someone goes berserk and shoots at these Americans?" Tulawie said.

Tulawie's fear was anchored on a statement issued by Misuari's followers. Khaid Adjibon, the State Chairman of MNLF's Lupah Sug State Revolutionary Committee, reminded the Suluanos about the century-old abuses committed by the American soldiers. He called on Suluanos to "unite as one and fight against the aggressors of their great-grandparents."

But the military dismissed Adjibon's appeal as mere propaganda. "They just want their presence felt by people, to remind the people that they are still around," said then Southern Command chief Lt. Gen. Alberto Braganza.

## US CENSUS

In Panamao town, Norin Maydin, barangay captain of Barangay Tinah, could not contain her smile while being interviewed by the American soldiers.

Asked later why, Maydin told NEWSBREAK: "*Para silang mga nagesensus sa barangay* (They acted as though they were conducting a census in the barangay)." She said the questions focused on the community's needs, the type of food and food intake, the water source.

Maydin was a bit tense before the interview because she said she thought they would ask about the peace and order situation in the province. Instead, they asked very basic things about her and her family. It was the first time for Maydin and two of her security escorts to see Americans in person. "*Mababait naman sila, akala ko nung una parang interrogation. Masaya silang kausap kahit hindi kami nagkakaintindihan minsan* (They're nice people, although I thought they would be interrogating me. It's nice to talk to them even if we sometimes don't understand each other)," Maydin added.

Capt. Steve Lewis, Staff Sgt. Lyle Michael, and Staff Sgt. Joshua Panchot conducted the "barangay census" in Tinah. Donnelly described the trio as experts—"Michael is a medical specialist, Panchot an engineer, and Lewis is the team leader."

The American military experts were surprised at the warm wel-

come they received from local villagers in the five municipalities that they visited. "I was really worried about coming here, but as soon as we stepped in this place, we had nothing but good reception and great hospitality from these people," said Panchot.

## DOUBTS LINGER

Lewis, who researched about Sulu prior to the trip, did not also expect a warm welcome. "We weren't sure about the people and how they were going to accept us. We know that there'd been conflicts here recently, but when we met them, everybody was friendly and we haven't met anyone who has been negative at all."

Overall, Wilson had a positive assessment: "Local folks were cooperative. This resulted in our successful mission."

The US military experts' assessment covered 39 barangays in Panamao, the Karawan Complex which includes Talipao and Patikul, and 16 barangays in the tri-border areas of Indanan, Maimbung, and Parang. Also included in the evaluation were the Sulu Electric Cooperative, Jolo Port Authority, the Department of Education, Jolo Provincial and Asturias Hospitals, the water district and the local cable television network to include five local radio stations.

"We have now here the basic but comprehensive data that will be submitted to the US Pacific Command for planning and fund sourcing," Wilson said.

Donnelly stressed they had not committed anything to the local folk of Sulu, "but we know they are expecting something from us."

But Mindanao Peaceweaver's Grace Rebollos, director of the Center for Peace and Development of Western Mindanao State University, remained doubtful about the outcome of the assessment. "What they are doing in Mindanao is simply a cosmetic approach...." She criticized the use of American soldiers for "supposed humanitarian work, when the US NGOs could do and deliver the projects."

The US State Department has poured, through USAID, US\$65 million in assistance to Mindanao. "Why would US Defense do the same thing?" Rebollos asked. A valid question perhaps, but probably not an urgent one to people who benefit from it. ■



JULIUS CARNELIO BACALARES

# What Shari'a?

THE PROBLEM IS AS BASIC AS FINDING ACCESS TO ISLAMIC COURTS

BY MYLAH REYES ROQUE

**S**hari'a courts were established almost three decades ago but they have yet to fulfill their potential for contributing to peace and development in Mindanao.

The problem is as basic as finding access to these courts. Only half of the total number of courts created by law have been set up. In places where they actually exist, Shari'a courts lose out to their informal, traditional counterpart in terms of patronage.

A recent study commissioned by the Supreme Court and the United Nations Development Program indicates many societal and governance issues that result in the underutilization of Shari'a courts. Can Shari'a courts truly exist within the Philippine judicial system, as originally envisioned by the law that created it, Presidential Decree (PD) 1083, also known as the Code of Muslim Personal Law of the Philippines?

Shari'a means Islamic or Muslim law. According to former Court of Appeals Presiding Justice Jainal Rasul, Shari'a "regulates the conduct of a Muslim from cradle to grave." Shari'a courts do not compare with regional trial courts (RTCs) and other lower courts, which have a wider jurisdiction over cases. This allows litigants to go forum shopping.

Shari'a in the Philippines, how-

ever, is unique because it has limited application. Scholars generally agree that PD 1083 was enacted by President Ferdinand Marcos in 1977 to resolve the Muslim conflict and help integrate Muslims into Philippine society by recognizing the uniqueness of their beliefs, culture, and tradition from the country's civil laws. Islam is not just a religion; it also provides for the secular way of life of Muslims.

Marcos, however, made sure that it applied only to marriage, divorce, paternity, filiation, support, parental authority, custody, guardianship, and property. The courts continued to have jurisdiction on all other matters, including crime and punishment.

Was Marcos's codification of Muslim personal laws sufficiently Islamic? Judge Bensaudi Arabani said that the code itself is "not beyond improvement." The Muslim

Code, for example, clearly shows a bias in its treatment of men over women, especially insofar as divorce and inheritance are concerned. The Constitution provides that "the State...should ensure the fundamental equality before the law of men and women." The Philippines is a signatory to the UN Convention on Elimination of all Forces of Discrimination against Women.

Arabani stressed that the Code does not discriminate against women, insisting that they have the option to require in a pre-nuptial agreement that she could also avail herself of divorce through single repudiation. He also justified the ratio of two shares to a male heir and

one share to a female heir on the ground that in Muslim societies, it is the male heir who shoulders the burden of keeping the family.

As the Constitution guarantees religious freedom, traditional "courts" called Agama or Sarah Agama (Tausug) presided by religious elders co-exist with Shari'a courts.

Within the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), as well as Regions 9 and 12 where Shari'a courts are located, only 25 out of the mandated 51 Shari'a Circuit Courts (SCCs) are operational. Ratio of court to people is 1:188,028 in Region 9, 1:81,829 in Region 12, and 1:128,367 in ARMM. In contrast, the national average is 1:37,000

Five permanent Shari'a District Court (SDC) stations cover five geographical jurisdictions: Sulu; Tawi-tawi; Zamboanga City (Basilan, Zamboanga del Norte and del Sur); Marawi City (Lanao del Norte and del Sur); and Cotabato City (Maguindanao, North Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat).

There are only two judges handling the five courts and they also happen to be regional trial court (RTC) judges at the same time: Parang (Sulu) RTC Judge Bensaudi Arabani Sr. is the acting SDC judge in Sulu, Tawi-tawi, Zamboanga, and Cotabato cities while Judge Rasat Balindong, RTC Judge of Midsayap (Cotabato) is

acting SDC judge in Marawi City.

There are other equally important positions that haven't been filled up. In 1989, Republic Act 6734, the Organic Act for the ARMM, created the Shari'a Appellate Court composed of one Presiding Justice and two Associate Justices. Up to now, this is not operational.

Courts are mostly located in the provincial level, requiring distant travel and expensive transportation.

Few cases are filed. From 2000 to 2003, only 135 cases were filed at the SDCs and 1,533 cases at the SCCs. This translates to five to six cases a year for each SDC and 15 cases per circuit court.

Despite the low caseload, the study said "clearance rates are notably low, indicating low productivity of judges and existence of backlogs." There are no statistics to indicate how many cases are resolved informally, either at the home of the elders or through the Agama councils.

The study noted the existence of both formal and informal dispute mechanisms in the region. Muslim societies put a premium on religious leaders, including judges of the Shari'a courts. While this situation is consistent with Muslim traditions, it actually undermines the Shari'a courts as a formal institution.

Aside from this, a substantial, though unrecorded, number of cases is resolved at the level of the Agama Arbitration Council. PD 1083 empowers the court to create this council to resolve certain types of cases, such as divorce (by *talaq* or *tafwid* meaning the traditional way of getting consensus), subsequent marriages, and offenses against customary laws. The council is composed of the clerk of court as head and the representative of each litigant.

The study noted the prevalence of religious bias among Muslim scholars or *ulamas*—many of whom have been educated abroad—against the codification of Muslim personal laws, as well as the capacity of judges to adequately rule on cases. (The Shari'a judges and lawyers undergo a 45-day training and seminar.) Aside from members of the Philippine bar and *ulamas*, non-lawyers and non-degree holders can take the bar provided they complete the seminar on Islamic Law and Jurisprudence required and authorized by the Supreme Court. **N**



# Courts Without Walls

ELDERS REPRESENTING VARIOUS TRIBES AND FAITHS HAVE THE LAST SAY

BY FROILAN GALLARDO *in Upi, Maguindanao*

**I**n this mountainous corner of southern Mindanao, justice is not served by a judge in a robe. It is dispensed by a council of elderly men.

Called "The Way of the Lukes (elderly men)," this unique way of conflict resolution is wholeheartedly accepted by 51,141 residents of Upi—Muslims, Christians, and the indigenous T'durays, most of whom have been Christianized. It has brought peace to this town, a former battleground of warring Maguindanaons, T'durays, and Christians some 36 kilometers south of Cotabato City.

"We have not had a serious peace and order problem since this council was organized four years ago. Everything is settled amicably and everyone is happy with the decision of the council," said Upi town councilor Sergio Beling Sr.

In the 1970s, Upi was engulfed in a war between the Ilagas (Christian vigilantes) and the Blackshirts (Muslim vigilantes).

Feliciano Luces, alias Kumander Toothpick, the Ilaga leader known as "the terror of the Muslims," surrendered in 1970, but the atrocities he committed created a deep misunderstanding among Muslims, T'durays, and Christians in Upi. "This is what the council has healed. It has bridged a lasting friendship among the residents," Beling said.

The council was created by Upi town Mayor Ramon Piang through Executive Order No. 4, which was later formalized in August 2001 by an ordinance passed by the town council.

The council is composed of six elderly men in their sixties and seventies—two Muslims, two Christians, and two T'durays. "We take turns in presiding over the council. If the case involves Muslims, I will take charge," explained Imam Ambak Lumanggal, a council member.

A T'duray council member will preside if the case involves

T'durays, and a Christian, if it involves Christians, added Lumanggal.

In cases where T'durays, Christians, and Muslims are involved, the council sits en banc to decide who is the most aggrieved party.

Appointed by the ethnic and religious groups they represent, the council members have no tenure of office. "Magtulong-tulong kaming lahat. We all help to bring a lasting solution to the cases," Lumanggal

said in the local dialect.

Last March, a cargo truck plying from Upi to Cotabato City fell into a ravine killing six passengers who hitched a ride. Enraged Upi residents, mostly Muslims, demanded a huge monetary compensation from the truck owner.

The council sat en banc and decided that the truck owner was being unfairly accused. The elders talked with the victims' families and impressed on them that the truck owner was not criminally liable because it was an accident.

"We told the families that they have always hitched a ride with the truck every time it goes to Cotabato and the owner did not ask payment. It was really just an accident," Lumanggal said. The families accepted the council decision and asked for a lower compensation.

When parties agree to settle amicably, a ritual called "kiss koko" is performed to make the agreement binding and meaningful.

Where a life is taken, the settlement involves bloodletting of animals (as opposed to the rido or clan war). Concerned parties perform a ritual called "bangon," which symbolizes bringing back the life of a person.

"It's really a symbolic settlement. What matters is that the aggrieved party regains his standing in the community," Lumanggal said.

According to Mayor Piang, the Council of Lukes is a mix of the Philippine justice system and the cultural practice of settling arguments.

In dispensing justice, the T'durays follow their set of laws called Tagudon-T'duray, while the Muslims

have the Holy Koran. "This way justice in Upi is respected because it is dispensed according to our ways and practices," Piang said.

A T'duray himself, Piang said the Way of the Lukes has the support of his people because it is cheaper than the Philippine courts. Litigants do not have to pay court fees for their cases to be heard. But the cases must first pass through the Lupong Tagapamayapa in the barangays.

"It is only after the Lupong Tagapamayapa gives up on the case shall the council step in to the case," Piang explained.

The Council of Elders has settled 35 cases ranging from murder, rape, theft, and land conflict since August 2001. "I have seen what violence can do to our town. I want peace to be my legacy...peace that our people can believe in," Piang said.

The quest for peace in Upi town is helped by a small community radio put up by the municipality on Feb. 8, 2004. Operating with a 300-watt transmitter and a P300,000 yearly budget, station *DXUP* has been bombarding the airwaves with messages of peace and value formation through programs that promote better relationships and understanding among Upi residents. It reaches all 35 barangays of Upi except 11 villages by the sea.

Housed in a one-story building beside Upi municipal hall, the radio station is manned by 11 volunteer reporters and technicians who run the operation 20 hours a day. It has two computers and radio equipment, which receives text messages and information from residents. Volunteers scrounge for supplies—paper and clips—from other offices of the municipal government.

"All of us did not have any experience in operating a radio station when we started in 2004. We learned along the way," said station manager Mario Debolgano.

A trader by profession, Debolgano divides his time between his store and the radio station.

For Debolgano, *DXUP* is "like a bridge" between the Upi municipal government, Council of Elders, and residents.

"We air the decisions made by the council but we make sure we omit the names of the litigants," he said. **N**

FROILAN GALLARDO

**TAKE CHARGE:**  
Upi Mayor  
Ramon Piang

# 'Action Man'

A POLICE GENERAL CLEANS UP A UNIVERSITY. WILL HE BE GOOD FOR MSU?

BY FROILAN GALLARDO *in Marawi*

**R**etired police General Ricardo de Leon appears to have weathered the controversy following his appointment as officer-in-charge of the state-run Mindanao State University (MSU). De Leon became the "transitional chancellor" last September when President Arroyo chose him over three Mindanao academics nominated by the school's Board of Regents.

His appointment triggered an uproar, with many angered by the fact that De Leon is not a native of Mindanao (he comes from Pangasinan) and is a retired police general with little academic experience. They feared creeping militarism in the foremost state university in Mindanao. Some saw the appointment as a political gift of President Arroyo to the police and military.

Yet a month after his appointment, De Leon, a graduate of the Philippine Military Academy in 1971, was already making headway in winning the hearts and minds of the students and faculty. He did so by meeting daily with the more than 18,000 students and faculty and discussing their problems.

"I spend my day talking a lot [to the students and teachers]. But it is good because I learn the problems firsthand," De Leon told **NEWSBREAK**.

His swift responses to the problems in MSU have earned him the moniker "Action Man." Upon learning the school's security was occupying a dormitory meant for students, De Leon ordered them evicted.

When we came to interview him, he was leading a clean-up drive, a first in the school campus. "He is now our big daddy," said a student.

Gargantuan problems have hounded MSU since its establishment in 1961. More than 25,000 illegal settlers squat on the 1,000-hectare former military reservation where the school campus is located. Because of them, at least 590 illegal structures—including

buildings and posh houses—have sprouted on the main campus. At present, the school occupies only about 250 hectares of the reservation. The squatters have illegally tapped into the campus electricity and water resources, making a huge dent on the school's P640-million-a-year budget.

Ghost employees also plague the school administration. De Leon, who made a headcount of security personnel, found that of the 87 university policemen, only 52 were actually reporting for work. The same

problem afflicts the Peace-Keeping Force, which supposedly has 200 men.

The presence of these armed men on campus had posed a major problem, with unpaid MSU security personnel involved in the kidnapping of students and teachers. De Leon immediately dismissed the erring employees and brought in a company of policemen and a company of Marines to safeguard the campus. Alex Luaman, director of the Commission on Audit, said P10 million a year will be saved with the dismissal of ghost employees.

De Leon has also decentralized the school budget and allowed the 16 colleges of MSU to draft their own budgets.

According to Luaman, De Leon, who is a non-Maranao, is not burdened with relatives seeking jobs in the university. Past MSU chancellors had to cope with this problem.

De Leon's detractors are few, but they represent a broad coalition of students and teachers. When news of De Leon's appointment came, they staged rallies on campus for two weeks. "We are furious because President Arroyo did not respect the search committee. De Leon should have passed through the process like the other applicants," said Najeeb Taib, president of the MSU Supreme

Student Government.

There were 40 applicants for the job but the Board of Regents narrowed its choices to three, namely: Macapado Muslim, chancellor of MSU General Santos; Nasroden Guro, MSU vice chancellor; and Ontique Masnar, an academic.

Taib said the students were never consulted on de Leon's appointment, which was not the case in the past. MSU students have a seat in the Board of Regents. He said President Arroyo's decision was "clearly an affront to academic freedom."

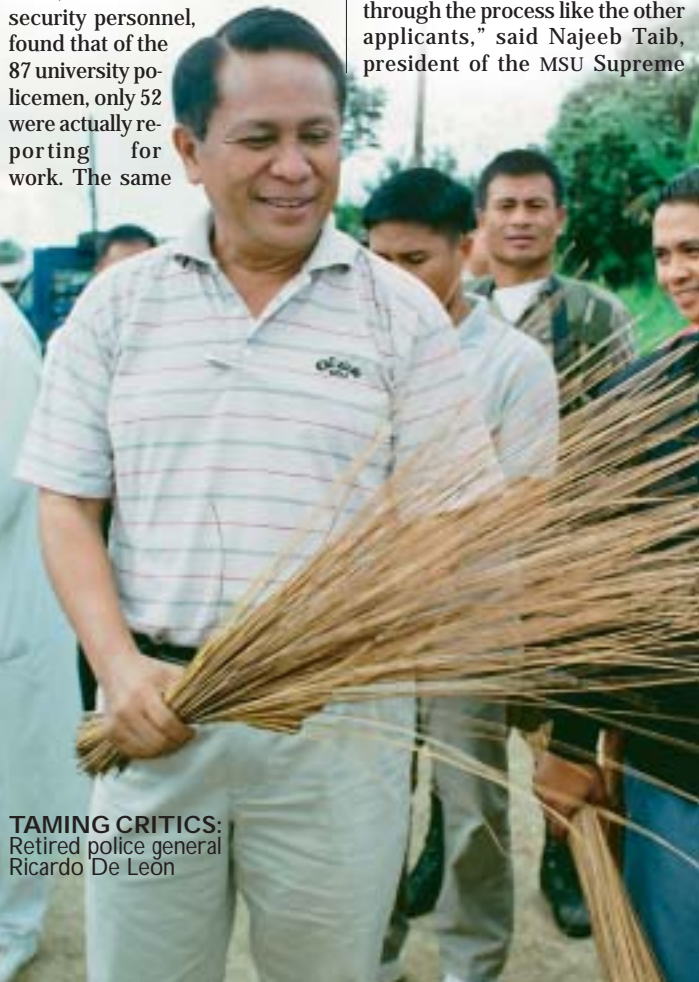
"MSU is an academic institution and its chancellor should be an academic, not a retired police general," said Norkaya Moham-mad, president of the MSU faculty federation. She blamed Memorandum Order (MO) 45, signed at the time of President Corazon Aquino, for their present predicament. Under MO 45, Mohammad said the President of the Philippines has the sole authority to appoint the chancellor of the MSU, unlike other state universities and colleges, which select their own presidents. "MO 45 is really like imperial Manila assigning a consul here. It's a travesty to Muslim academics," Mohammad said.

Furthermore, Elin Anisha Capal Guro, a director of the MSU Alumni Association, said being a non-Mindanaoan and a non-Maranao, De Leon probably would only pay lip service to the history of the Moros and the indigenous peoples in Mindanao.

But, according to Presidential Assistant for Mindanao Jesus Dureza, the school "needs De Leon to help in security issues such as squatters, drugs, and officials occupying portions of the MSU campus."

De Leon, who has a doctorate in public safety and has authored two books, said his instructions from President Arroyo were to stay on the job for at least a year. "Even I was surprised by my appointment. I thought I was to be given another job." He added that he is challenged by the problems of the school and is sad because it cannot retain its best teachers, who leave for better paying jobs.

"This school really needs drastic change for it to survive," De Leon said. "The reforms I am making here are for the students and faculty." **N**



**TAMING CRITICS:**  
Retired police general  
Ricardo De Leon



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# Young and Promising

THE NEW CITIES OF  
MINDANAO ARE MODELS FOR  
HARNESSING RESOURCES  
AND POTENTIALS

BY MIRIAM GRACE A. GO *in Davao del Norte*

**Y**ou'd be inspired by this afternoon tour. You pass by a private vacant lot that a loader and a backhoe from the city engineering office are clearing. It's the n<sup>th</sup> unattended plot of land that the mayor ordered planted to fruit trees and flower plants on the city government's account. Eyesores, such as idle lands-turned-instant dumpsites, could emotionally weigh down otherwise productive individuals.

You reach the old public market that has been converted into a cultural and trade center, where you will find good bargains. Despite the busyness of the place and all the fresh plants, flowers, fruits, and vegetables sold in the stalls, there is cleanliness and order. The pathways are dry, the displays in the stalls seem to follow a uniform design, there are no shirtless store helpers yelling excuse-me's, and the sellers and the buyers are cordial.

The place is not stinky, either, even if the livestock auction center is prac-





ANTHONY GUADALUPE JR.

tically beside it. On weekends, the street in front of the center is closed for *tiangges* and street parties.

You're in Tagum, an hour's drive from Davao City. And there's something here that the lush greenery, the still fresh air, and imposing images of hills and mountains can't hide: the signs of progress.

About four hours away by land from Tagum, the city of Tacurong is equally bustling. You'll just know you've reached it after kilometers of rice fields and plantations. Suddenly, the roads are concrete; there are shops, banks, commercial arcades, and restaurants lining the major streets; and private and passenger vehicles abound. And not unexpectedly, there's a Jollibee store that beck-

ons. The branch in Tacurong is reportedly one of Jollibee's bestsellers.

Travel another hour, and you'll reach the city of Digos, which boasts of increasing its local tax collections since it computerized its tax mapping and assessment system about three years ago.

## MAYORS AS MANAGERS

There are characteristics common to the three new Mindanao cities that NEWSBREAK visited that could explain why they are performing well. They have mayors who run the city government like businesses, or at least city planners and administrators who manage them the way they would a corporation.

This entrepreneurial mindset leads them to prioritize the infrastructure that would make their cities conducive to trade and business, while protecting and harnessing the resources they already have. And in all these drives for progress and development, their people's welfare is not forgotten; in fact, not even the welfare of people beyond their borders. Indeed, while these cities are dominated by Christians, they are surrounded by Muslim communities. And their progress has had an impact on residents of conflict-ridden places of Mindanao, where peace is being worked out so that towns and cities can thrive.

Planning and development coordinator Jaime Cedullo said, "Because [cities] are at the crossroads, we have to attend also to the needs of the [surrounding] municipalities." In Tacurong, in fact, their declared goal is to "achieve a harmonious and progressive Chrislamic society."

Representatives of local government units (LGUs) from different parts of the country have gone on educational tours to Tacurong, Digos, and Tagum. Here they learn that it's possible to get only so much help, grow on your own, and deliver.

## CITYHOOD DEBATE

In the last few years, there's been a debate on whether a moratorium on creating new cities should be imposed. Municipalities want to be converted into cities because cityhood entails an increase in their internal revenue allotment (IRA). It's the same reason that existing cities, through their league, are opposing new conversions.

In 2006, a P38.295-billion IRA will be divided among 120 cities, and P56.61 billion among 1,450 municipalities. Additional recipient-cities would mean less IRA for the old cities. The old cities are saying that cityhood demands more services, at higher standards at that. A tax-collection share less than what they used to enjoy would affect the quality of those services.

But the three cities in Mindanao stand as arguments against this assumption; they were converted before discussions on the viability of converting more cities became serious. While it's true that the IRA still covers more than half of their operations, these cities have also systematically tapped local revenue sources, thus making them increasingly independent financially.

There are 27 cities in the six regions of Mindanao, 11 of them we classified as new, having been converted only in the last eight years, after local leaders had

tasted the benefits of local autonomy brought about by the implementation of the Local Government Code of 1991.

The advantage of being converted into a city only recently is that an LGU has had the chance to plan well from the time that its conversion was being proposed, says Romeo Aniñon, who has been planning and development coordinator of Digos since 1987, when it was still a municipality. "You get to plan effectively, so introducing new measures is not costly. Unlike in old cities, there are a lot of constraints [when you want to introduce changes]. A lot of people will be affected," Aniñon said.

## TACURONG

*'Don't Just Tax, Tax, Tax'*

The document prepared in 2002 detailed the livelihood, health, infrastructure, and environmental projects that needed to be prioritized in the next three years. Buy medicines, conduct dental mis-

**TACURONG**

**FAST FACTS**

**Achieved Cityhood:**  
Sept. 18, 2000

**Location:**  
Central Mindanao; at the crossroads of the Davao-General Santos-Cotabato highways; 178 kms from Davao City, 92 kms from GenSan, 96 kms from Cotabato City

**Land Area:**  
15,340 hectares

**Population:** 84,012, projection for 2005

**Main Livelihood:** Farming

**2005 Income:** P183.68 million (estimated)

LUIS LIWANAG

sions, provide electrification from one area to another, construct concrete roads from this point to that point, build a wet market, etc. Specific training for personnel, such as in justice administration and fiscal management, and an allotment for youth programs are among the items, too.

The 56 undertakings were identified based on a survey and appraisal of the weaknesses and potentials of the locality. They needed a total of P53.98 million to be completed. As early as then, the corresponding sources of funding for those projects from 2003 to 2005 were determined.

Yes, it's serious governance. And it's happening not in some big province or city, where comprehensive planning is expected but sometimes not done, but in a barangay called New Passi. Actually, it's happening in each of the 20 barangays of Tacurong City in Sultan Kudarat.

Converted from a first-class town to a fifth-class city in 2000, Tacurong in 2001 partnered with the Philippine-Canada Local Government Support Program to draft an "executive agenda" primarily to improve the delivery of services and the earning capability of the city. Part of the blueprint was to ensure that the needs, concerns, and strengths of the barangays are identified. After each barangay came up with a "resource appraisal," their plans formed a big part of the city's development plan. The other part came from a plan drafted by a council composed of 24 representatives from the private sector.

Every year since then, the city government has been allotting P2 million for every barangay for them to realize their plans. The rest of the funds come from the barangays' mandatory share in the IRA and their congressman's pork barrel. In most instances, the "city aid," as they call it, is even higher than the barangays' mandatory share in the IRA. "In Tacurong, we can really say that it's not the mayor's agenda [that is being implemented]; it's the people's agenda," Cedullo said. He says it's a reflection of the leadership style of Mayor Lino Montilla, an electrical engineer who managed the family's vast farms before he entered politics. "He treats employees as co-workers" and not as subordinates.

For the past three years, farmers in Barangay New Passi who didn't have enough capital to plant have depended on their barangays to finance them; they paid after harvest. In Barangay San Antonio, a farmers' cooperative was able to take out a loan of P1 million from the barangay. The rolling fund, which has seen the farmers through several cropping seasons, is now available even to farmers from the neighboring town of President Quirino.

Farming being the main livelihood of residents, the city government invested in common agricultural facilities. It has what's reportedly the biggest mechanical drier in Southeast Asia, 13 big rice mills, and an eight-hectare demo farm where they grow seeds that are certified by the agriculture department and sold to farmers' cooperatives at half the market price.

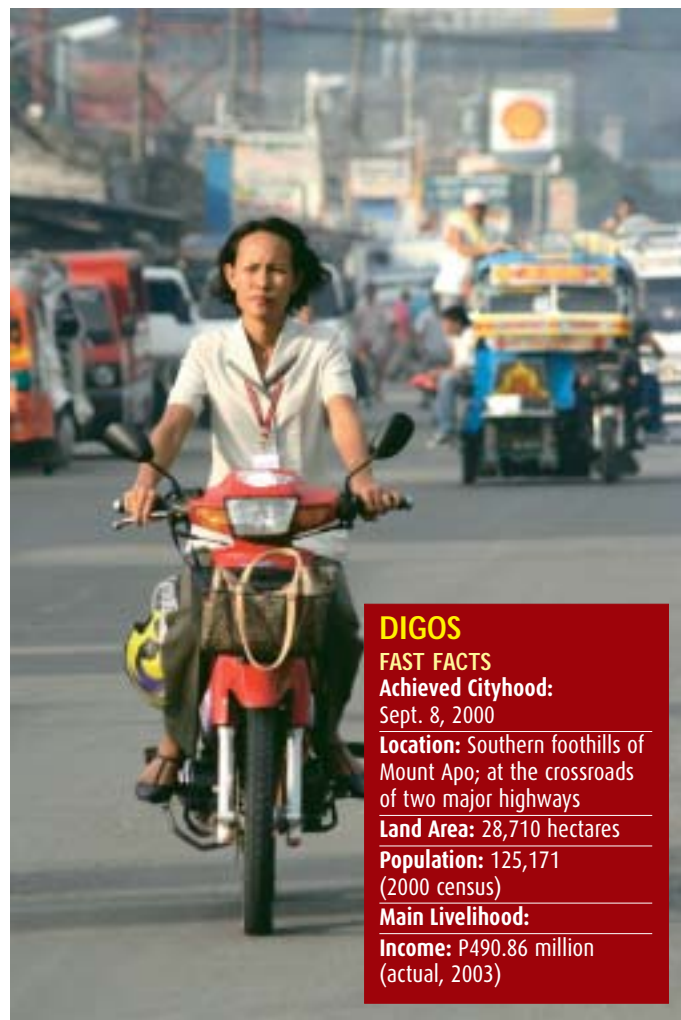
"Although you will see a lot of vast lands, big houses, they belong to only a few. Sometimes, the lands in a barangay belong to only five persons or families. Most of the farmers here are just tenants, so they need all the help possible," Cedullo said.

The local social welfare department identified the five poorest barangays, where the city government picked the heads of households to enroll with Philhealth for free. The program has 5,000 beneficiaries so far.

What the city uses to help the farmers, it gets from the business sector, without necessarily burdening the latter. New cities, upon their creation, have a five-year moratorium on tax increases. Although it is allowed to impose higher taxes starting this year, Tacurong doesn't intend to do so. In collecting taxes, the city's emphasis is on efficiency, not on rate increases.

"The mayor doesn't want us to just tax, tax, tax. That will drive away investors," Cedullo said. "So we increase the efficiency of the collection. Of all the cities in the region, we are the smallest, but in the past years, we've been alternately first and second most efficient in tax collection," said city administrator Eduardo Nicolo.

Tacurong provides additional incentives to investors so they would come. Under the new investment code, which it drafted with business sector representatives and will implement starting 2006,



## DIGOS

### FAST FACTS

**Achieved Cityhood:**  
Sept. 8, 2000

**Location:** Southern foothills of Mount Apo; at the crossroads of two major highways

**Land Area:** 28,710 hectares

**Population:** 125,171  
(2000 census)

**Main Livelihood:**

**Income:** P490.86 million  
(actual, 2003)

all newly established businesses would enjoy a 25-percent tax discount, regardless of the capital. As the amount of the investment increases, additional incentives will be given to the company.

There's a condition that investors have to meet, however: 70 percent of the available jobs in their companies or shops should be given to residents of Tacurong. "In that case, our residents stay, and the money circulates here," Cedullo said.

## DIGOS

### *Pampering the Private Sector*

When Digos, the capital town of Davao del Sur, became a city in September 2000, how to foster a "good business climate" was the biggest challenge it faced, says city planner Romeo Aniñon.

"We believe that progress depends on how strong the private sector is. There are certain problems that only businesses can solve," he explained. "When there's growth in business, you solve unemployment. The busi-

nesses pay more taxes, the employed pay taxes. Then you'll have the means to deliver health services, education, to the residents."

So when its conversion into a city caused a windfall in its IRA—from P60.68 million a year as a municipality to P122.32 million and then P206 million as a city—Digos prioritized the construction of road networks, drainage systems, and improved lightings in the next two to three years.

The investment paid off. In Tacurong's first two years as a city, collections from the two largest tax bases—realty taxes and local taxes—steadily increased. Real property taxes increased from P2 million in 2000, to P13 million in 2001, to P14.76 million in 2002. Over the same period, local tax collection increased from P11 million to P12 million to P13.6 million. Its total revenues, including the IRA, rose from P120.72 million to P169.71 million to P265.23 million in those three years.

In 2002, Nakayama, the biggest



manufacturer of bricks from Japan, put up a plant in Digos and invested P100 million. Every year, at least 10 new establishments register with the city government. The increase in city revenues facilitated the delivery of more services. Preventive measures against dengue had been administered, and barangay health centers were provided ample supplies of medicines. The city government was able to purchase the necessary textbooks for all grade school and high school levels, provide computers in every public school, and send teachers to

trainings and seminars. It did so using money separate from the 1-percent special education fund that LGUs are required to set aside from realty taxes.

The city won't wait before the influx of businesses causes land-use and environmental chaos. Its zoning program doesn't have space for industries and plants that may emit hazardous chemicals. "We want to avoid a situation in the future when we will earn more but our people will have health problems that will require us to spend more to address," Aniñon said. Another form of "zoning" in a way

is how "we try to control the entry of people to the center by providing them livelihood" in their home barangays, he says.

As in Digos's early years as a city, new roads to progress are being paved. This year, the national government has a budget to concretize the road from Davao to Kidapawan, a considerable stretch of which will pass through Digos. This is expected to attract new investments.

"We don't see Digos staying as a manufacturing center," Aniñon said. "Our goal is to become a financial center [in the region]."

## TAGUM

### City-Owned Businesses

Tagum in Davao del Norte, like all newly converted cities, got a boost with the dramatic increase in its IRA in 1998, says city planning and development coordinator Reynaldo Cadelina. Generally, a municipality's share can increase four times when it becomes a city.

But, he says, it was leadership—particularly the mayor's practical business sense and transparency—that sustained that initial advantage to make Tagum the P364-million annual earner that it is today.

Before Mayor Rey Uy entered politics, he studied agriculture in college and helped manage the family's wide-ranging business interests in Tagum and neighboring towns. The Uys are one of the biggest producers of durian, has a bus line and a chain of restaurants, and buy copra.

His training made him a stickler for quick results and efficiency, as can be seen in the way he runs the city. He runs it like he would run a corporation. (The main economic activity in the city remains agriculture. Big banana plantations are located here. There are 16 corporate farms in Davao del Norte, covering 18,708.58 hectares.)

For instance, when Tagum became a city and had to embark on massive road construction projects to become attractive to investors, the city government put up an asphalt batching plant and a complete equipment pool. That way, the city government got the contracts for its own construction needs and saved a whopping 30 percent on going rates for the projects. When the city government doesn't have a project for itself, it bids for con-

tracts with other LGUs. The most recent project it bagged was with the municipal government of Mati in Davao Oriental.

These "economic enterprises" not only saved the city millions on expectedly bloated contractors and consultants' fees, they answered for P67.7 million of the city's estimated revenues for 2005. For last year, Tagum targeted total revenues of P123.62 million from local sources. By the end of November, they had collected P123.3 million or almost the full amount.

Aside from the asphalt batching plant, the city-owned businesses include the public market, a cultural and trade center (which is actually the old public market), a livestock auction center, a centralized transport terminal, a modern slaughterhouse, and the re-developed public cemetery.

Under Uy's predecessor, who initiated the campaign for Tagum's cityhood, the public market and the transport terminal were established. The new administration, taking out loans from Landbank, built on the initial ventures. The ventures expanded so quickly that the mayor had to create the Office of Economic Enterprises to take over their management from the city treasurer's office.

City administrator Rafael Abrenica says the mayor sees business opportunities for the city government in almost every situation. For example, he once computed that the worth of meat, fruits, and vegetables traded in Tagum reaches P1 billion in a year—farmers from neighboring provinces bring their produce to Tagum, where buyers from as far as Leyte in the Visayas and Bicol in Luzon await them. The city government started collecting a 25-centavo tax for every kilo of these products traded in the city.

These days, the mayor is busy persuading the local offices of national agencies to relocate to a 30-hectare property owned by the city government—for free. There's a business side to it, however. The city government is in turn hoping to bag the contracts for the construction of these offices.

Abrenica says the mayor explains his drive this way: "*Kayo ang pasahero, ako ang drayber. Kaskasero ang drayber nyo.*" (Imagine the city as the passenger, I the driver. I happen to be a speed demon.) **N**



## TAGUM

### FAST FACTS

**Achieved Cityhood:** March 7, 1998

**Location:** Southern Mindanao; at the intersection of three major road networks: Philippine-Japan Friendship Highway, Davao-Mati Road, and Davao-Agusan Road

**Land Area:** 19,580 hectares

**Population:** 200,769 (projected for 2004)

**Main Livelihood:** Farming, manufacturing, trading

**2005 Income:** P364 million (estimated)





# Systems Breakdown

DESPITE THE NEW GOVERNOR'S PROMISES, THE PROBLEMS IN ARMM WILL TAKE A LONG TIME TO RESOLVE

BY GEMMA B. BAGAYAU in Cotabato City

**T**he night after she received a new demand letter from the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS), sleep eluded 53-year-old Amparo Bendijo. It was the third time the agency had reminded her of her unpaid housing loan. The latest letter brought more troubling news: continued failure on her part to pay would prompt the GSIS to auction off her house.

Bendijo is one of around 16,000 teachers employed by the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) who were victimized by the failure of the regional government to remit to the GSIS money deducted from their salaries. In Bendijo's case, GSIS—in its demand letter—claimed that it failed to receive her monthly amortizations as payment for the loan she got to finance her house renovation. Bendijo said that, all this time, deductions were being made from her precisely to pay for the loan.

Fearful of losing her home, Bendijo thought of going to loan sharks to borrow money to pay for the amount she supposedly owed GSIS. She is not the only one whose lives were disrupted as a result of corruption in the regional government. Because it had not been receiving members' contributions and loan payments from the regional government, the GSIS suspended the release of new loans to teachers in the area. Teachers depended on those loans to finance their children's tuition and meet their families' needs. Those expecting their retirement funds or additional money from maturing insurance policies found their hopes doused.

A subsequent congressional investigation and attention from the national media prompted the national government to step in. After releasing funds to settle a portion of the regional government's obligations to the GSIS, its president and CEO, Winston Garcia, signed a memorandum of agreement with

then Gov. Parouk Hussin lifting the suspension of the ARMM teachers' loan privileges.

But the issue is far from resolved. In hearings conducted by the House of Representatives justice committee, the GSIS claimed that the regional government failed to remit around P1 billion in insurance premiums and loan payments. A report from the Commission on Audit covering the period 2002 to 2004 also revealed anomalous transactions in the regional education department involving unreported negotiated checks worth P1.02 billion and erroneous bank debits amounting to P7.6 billion.

Under the terms of the agreement, the regional government is supposed to amortize the rest of the amount it owes the insurance agency in 15 years. How the regional government can settle that obligation without sacrificing basic services is a big question.

Still unresolved as well is the issue of who is responsible for the fund mess and whether those at fault will be made to account for it. It's unlikely that the amounts grew that big without the knowledge of higher-ups in the regional and national offices.

## JUICY POST

What happened in the regional education department is just a symptom of larger problems plaguing the autonomous region, Benny Bacani of Cotabato's Notre Dame University tells NEWSBREAK.

Beyond its effects on the



NEW CHALLENGE: ARMM Gov. Zaldy Ampatuan

ROLEX DELA REINA/FEA

teacher's lives, the case, Bacani notes, resurrected old issues about the failure of systems in the ARMM that makes it possible for the corrupt to evade accountability for their actions. While corruption happens almost everywhere in the country, in the ARMM, the corrupt "are able to do it with impunity."

A case in point is the situation at the education department. Described by former ARMM governor Parouk Hussin in a radio interview as "a very juicy post" coveted by many, the department gets a big chunk of the regional government's budget. Observers say this is one

reason the position of education secretary in the autonomous region has traditionally been held by politicians or their relatives.

From 1996 to 2001, the post was held by Bai Sandra Sema, wife of Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema. From 2002 to 2004, it was held by Mahid Mutilan, then the regional vice governor. In a number of instances, the sitting regional governor assumed the task of running this department. After Mutilan's failed bid for governor of Lanao del Sur, Hussin took over as regional department secretary and appointed Leovigilda Cinches

# CORRUPTION IS DONE HERE WITH IMPUNITY

as its officer-in-charge.

Because powerful people are involved, auditors are afraid to render negative observations concerning the education department. Even news reporters tiptoe around corruption stories for fear of incurring the ire of local leaders. "It's a breakdown of systems in general," Bacani says, attributing it to the "instruments of violence [that] are controlled strongly by those in power."

Lawyer Jose Lorena, former resident Ombudsman for ARMM, agrees. The issue might not have reached such proportions, Lorena says, if the GSIS offices based in Cotabato City, Zamboanga City and Iligan City had called the attention of the ARMM to the unremitted amounts at the outset. "The agency is supposed to file an administrative complaint against concerned offices after failure to remit deductions they made against the salaries for two consecutive months." The rule of law is very weak here, Lorena says. So are accounting and auditing systems.

## OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE?

Teachers have pinned their hopes on newly elected ARMM Gov. Zaldy Ampatuan, who promised to address the problem during the election campaign.

In his inaugural speech last September 30, Ampatuan vowed to enforce special administrative mechanisms that would prevent a repeat of the past irregularities in the DepEd-ARMM. Ampatuan has also reportedly ordered three officials implicated in the case—former regional education secretary Leovigilda Cinches, accountant Pangalian Maniri, and cashier Norensa Arimao—transferred to his office while the investigation is going on.

The victory of Ampatuan—despite his reputation as a spoiled scion of a warlord—is seen in a positive light by some who believe that he's more grounded than his predecessor Hussin, a former rebel, who didn't know much about local politics. To Bacani, the influence of the Ampatuans over local government leaders opens up an opportunity to run the ARMM as a coherent, unified sys-

tem. A big problem before, Bacani explains, was that the regional government worked separately from the local government.

There is also a sense that Ampatuan won on account of his family's power and not Malacañang's support. After all, there were clear indications that Malacañang did not want Ampatuan to win, observers note. There were even efforts to postpone the elections to avert an Ampatuan leadership of the ARMM. Malacañang preferred Simeon Datumanong, sources say, because he was more acceptable to the Organization of Islamic Conference.

Yet, while the new leadership probably does not owe the national leaders any debt of gratitude, it has a lot of political debts to pay to local leaders. The Ampatuan clan is also known for breaking down municipalities under their influence into smaller municipalities, so they can put members of the clan to rule them.

Whether Ampatuan would be able to set things right and institute meaningful changes in the way things are run remains to be seen. During the campaign period, Ampatuan reportedly told constituents that, if he wins, he may take on the post of the regional education secretary in a concurrent capacity.

According to reports, Ampatuan, who took over as the region's fifth elected governor last September 30, created a task force composed of auditors, planners, and researchers to determine the actual number of teachers in the autonomous region—purportedly to rid the regional education department of thousands of "ghost teachers." The governor reportedly wants the department's payroll "cleansed" before the start of calendar year 2006.

But there is no cause to be optimistic yet. Purging the department of alleged ghost teachers was also Mutilan's avowed objective when he took over the leadership of the region's education department.

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

Meantime, since the new governor assumed office, he has appointed former Maguindanao

Schools Division Superintendent

Udtog Kawit as regional education secretary. Kawit, who before the regional elections led some 4,000 teachers in Maguindanao in airing their grievances over the regional bureaucracy, hails from Shariff Aguak, the seat of the provincial government of Maguindanao, where Ampatuan's father, Andal Ampatuan, is governor. Kawit's wife, Miriam, is municipal schools supervisor of Shariff Aguak, where the younger Ampatuan used to be mayor.

But there are observers who doubt whether Kawit himself will run the show at the education department. NEWSBREAK learned from sources privy to the workings of the regional government that the new governor had appointed his sister, Rebecca Ampatuan, as the department's finance director—the position vacated by Cinches.

Some say that for meaningful changes to be achieved, intervention from national leaders might be necessary. Auditors from the Commission on Audit's central office must be sent in to do special audits. Charges must be filed against erring officials. The budget department should withhold fund releases if local government officials are unable to explain properly where the funds went. At the same time, erring officials should immediately be suspended.

These are not happening, Lorena says. The move of the office of the Ombudsman to suspend Lanao del Sur Gov. Bashier Manalao for nepotism in appointing relatives to the provincial government was recently stopped by a temporary restraining order from the Court of Appeals. Besides, nationally elected leaders prefer not to rock the boat in the region; several of them owe their posts to local leaders. The autonomous region has traditionally been the last resort of those who are lagging behind in the national tallies.

Indeed, while the road to reform the ARMM is paved with good intentions, vested interests continue to block it. The current system of regional governance has failed, local residents say, and it's probably time to change it. ■







# Growing, Growing

MINDANAO'S  
ECONOMY LOOKS UP

**O**verall, the island's economy was vibrant in 2004, with two regions continuing to soar, Northern Mindanao and Southeastern Mindanao (Davao region). What is striking, though, are the significant strides taken by the poorest areas, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao and Caraga or Northeastern Mindanao. Both regions made a big leap from 2003 to 2004. Lala Rimando provides snapshots of the Mindanao regions' economies—and the big picture is encouraging.

## **Region 9** **WESTERN MINDANAO**

*(Zamboanga City, Zamboanga del Norte and Sibugay)*

The economy of the provinces in the Zamboanga Peninsula was the most sluggish in Mindanao. It grew by only 4.9 percent because of insufficient rainfall in the area. The region accounted for 15.4 percent of Mindanao's economy.

It continues to be predominantly dependent on agriculture and fish production. It is the country's largest rubber producer and also produces coconut and cassava.

## **Region 10** **NORTHERN MINDANAO**

*(Provinces of Bukidnon, Misamis Oriental and Occidental, Lanao del Norte, Iligan and the island of Camiguin)*

Region 10 continues to soar. In the whole of Mindanao, its manufacturing and trade sectors are the most vibrant, contributing 34.7 percent and 34.3 percent, respectively. No wonder the region is also the biggest employer (1.8 million, for a 98 percent employment rate). Attribute these to the region's natural resources and strategic location.

Bukidnon, one of Mindanao's food baskets because its lofty mountains and gently rolling plateaus are beyond the typhoon belt, is ideal for high-value crops like pineapples, banana, sugarcane, and premium-priced vegetables like lettuce, asparagus, carrots, broccoli and cauliflower.

Thanks to the region's cheap power cost, com-

JOE GALVEZ



panies that process these raw foods, plus those that are engaged in heavy industries, have sprouted in areas like Phividec Industrial Authority, the biggest industrial zone in the country.

And because it is host to ports which are the most accessible entry and exit points to and from the rest of Mindanao, it is a major trading area not only for agricultural and processed foods but for other non-agricultural goods originating from the neighboring regions, including those from Iligan City, which also hosts a number of heavy industries.

In the first quarter of 2005, Japanese-owned Philippine Sinter Corp poured in P520 million for its expansion, boosting the total investments poured into Northern Mindanao to P1.07 billion.

increase.

Davao rules in terms of trade. Cargo traffic at the Davao port is the busiest in Mindanao (38 percent market share). Fresh bananas, corn, banana, sugarcane, coffee, and coconut oil are produced and processed for local consumption and for export to countries in Asia and other stable markets like Japan and the US, which the region has enjoyed long relationships with.

And as volume of business in agriculture improved, so did the support sectors, such as banking

## Did you know?

### MINDANAO PRODUCES

76% of our bananas  
87% of our pineapple  
99% of our durian  
90% of our lanzones  
more than 99% of our mangosteen  
54% of our papaya  
51% of our langka  
52% of our pomelo  
99% of our marang

Source: National Statistics and Coordination Board

from 6.9 percent the year before.

The economic activities spawned by the abundant agricultural products continue to attract investors. There are new or additional foreign and domestic investments in the seaweed processing industry, wood chips factory, and construction materials industries.

## Region 12 SOUTHERN MINDANAO

(Provinces of North and South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, and Sarangani)

Fishing is a major economic activity because of the rich fishing grounds in the region. Tuna, which is processed or canned in General Santos, is one of the most popular produce.

The other major earners in the region are fishing, agriculture and forest-related products. Hydroelectric power is provided by the Maria Cristina Falls. Steel, cement and coconut oil are some of the important products of the region. Coconut, pineapple, rubber, sugarcane, rice, corn, banana and other fruits are the main agricultural produce.

## Region 13 CARAGA REGION OR NORTHEASTERN MINDANAO

(Provinces of Agusan del Sur and del Norte, and Surigao del Sur and del Norte)

Caraga is noted for its wood-based economy, extensive water resources and its rich mineral deposits such as iron, gold, silver, nickel, chromite, manganese and copper. Its leading crops are palay,

banana and coconut. It is also blessed with excellent tourism potentials because of its unspoiled and beautiful beaches, abundant and fresh seafood, and balmy weather.

Yet, it is one of the most impoverished regions in the country, and the second poorest in Mindanao, next to the ARMM. It is also the least populated in Mindanao.

But in 2004, Caraga's economy grew by 5.2 percent from 2.4 percent in 2003, the highest recorded year-to-year increment, and a turnaround from being the most lagged in 2003. The recovery was mainly brought about by the turnaround in construction activities from the 26.5 percent slump in 2003 to a healthy 7.7 percent growth. Mining and quarrying have likewise rebounded from a 2.5 percent drop in 2003 to register a 1.2 percent expansion.

These have more than compensated for the decrease in the performance of the forestry subsector, which through the years, has been affected by closures or slowdown in operations of their corporate buyers. Agriculture, fishery and forestry still employ more than half of the region's labor force.

## ARMM (Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao) MUSLIM MINDANAO

(Provinces of Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu and Tawi-tawi)

ARMM's economy grew 5.4 percent in 2004, more than double its 2.2 percent rate in 2003. The region started to reap the benefits of the donor-assisted infrastructure and other projects which were poured into the area in 2002 and 2003. The new farm-to-market roads, post-harvest facilities, and small ports led to better commodity prices.

The island provinces are included in the top three biggest contributors to the country's fisheries sector. Seaweeds that are cultured in the waters of the Sulu Sea account for as much as 70 percent of the country's total production of the crop.

ARMM is endowed with favorable climate, and its mainland provinces are blessed with wide forest area and fertile valleys. Corn, palay, coconut, abaca, nuts, and root crops are widely grown. Livestock raising is also widely practiced with carabao, cattle, goats, and horses as the major livestock commodities. **N**



JOE GALVEZ

## Region 11 DAVAO REGION OR SOUTHEASTERN MINDANAO

(Davao Oriental, del Sur and del Norte, Compostela Valley)

Davao Region, which accounted for 4.6 percent of the country's economy in 2004 and 30.1 percent of Mindanao's domestic product, is on a roll. It further pushed its growth momentum, expanding by 6.9 percent—the highest growth rate among the six regions in Mindanao—from 4.8 percent the previous year. This was anchored on the robust performances of the agriculture, fisheries and forestry sector, and the service sector, which both registered a 7.6 percent

and finance, telecommunications, real estate and construction, and the wholesale and retail industries. The latter is quite obvious with the proliferation of convenience stores, thus further boosting trading activities to 7.4 percent

## GROSS REGIONAL DOMESTIC PRODUCT (in million pesos)

		GRDP (in million pesos)		Growth Rate	
		2003	2004	2002-03	2003-04
IX	WESTERN MINDANAO	28,571	9,959	4.4%	4.9%
X	NORTHERN MINDANAO	46,442	49,242	5.4	6.0
XI	DAVAO REGION	48,319	51,671	4.7	6.9
XII	SOUTHERN MINDANAO	37,831	40,254	4.4	6.4
XIII	CARAGA	12,455	13,172	1.7	5.8
ARMM	MUSLIM MINDANAO	9,351	9,852	2.2	5.4

Source: National Statistics and Coordination Board



# Beehive of ODA Projects

LIVELIHOOD AND EDUCATION GET A BOOST FROM FOREIGN DONORS

BY ISAGANI DE CASTRO JR.

**A**fter decades of neglect by the international donor community, Mindanao has started to become a beehive of foreign-assisted projects. Poverty levels are highest in southern Philippines, especially in Muslim Mindanao, and this fact is not lost on bilateral and multilateral donors who are now shifting their focus of development assistance activities from north to south.

The ambassadors of the Philippines' major donor countries, especially Japan, United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom have been flying in and out of Mindanao to inspect projects mostly aimed at reducing poverty and improving children's access to education. Also foreign-funded are small and large-scale infrastructure projects that donors hope will spur economic activity there.

This has not always been the case. Official Development Assistance (ODA) for Mindanao became a priority only during the Ramos administration, according to a May 2004 study, *International De-*

*velopment Assistance in Conflict-Affected Areas: The Case of Mindanao*. "It was not until the mid-1990s when Mindanao was accorded some serious attention by the Philippine government, in line with the peace efforts and promise of increased commitment for the development of Mindanao," said Josefina Faulan, the study's author. "As a result, Mindanao gained popularity in terms of ODA commitment." Faulan works with the National Economic and Development Authority's Regional Development Council staff.

She said four donor-countries had identified Mindanao as a special focus area for assistance: US, Australia,

Japan, and Canada. Among the multilateral donor agencies, the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and UN organizations also gave more attention to the south.

However, compared with the ODA that goes to other parts of the Philippines, Mindanao still gets the smallest amount of assistance. "Despite all these commitments, Mindanao remained the lowest recipient of ODA compared with Luzon and Visayas. Looking at the years 2000 to 2002, ODA for Mindanao consistently recorded 7 percent of the total ODA committed to the Philippines," Faulan said.

Her study cited two main reasons for this: the low absorptive capacity of Mindanao in terms of manpower and social preparation vis-a-vis Luzon and Visayas; lack of peace and security, which disrupts implementation of ODA projects. "Understandably, such situation affects the decisions of the donor community to either continue or increase commitment for the development of Mindanao," she said.

The US government, through the US Agency for International

Development (USAID), has been the most active in pushing aid to Mindanao through the Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM), a program that started in 1996 and is now in its second phase.

## BADLY NEEDED

US Ambassador Francis Ricciardone, just before he left the Philippines in May 2005, said he had visited the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) over a dozen times during his three-year tour of duty. "I went to Basilan four times. The first time, I saw burnt-out schoolhouses; the last time, I saw the Internet in high

schools," he said. "The reason we pay so much attention to Mindanao is that that's where the poverty is. That's where the worst of the conflict has been historically. That's where the injustice has been historically. That's where the lack of development is. It's not just because of terrorism, but because we want our friends to be well. Everybody likes to have healthy friends and rich friends. We're no exception as a country. It's way better if your friends are not ill and suffering."

USAID's grant assistance to Mindanao was increased from US\$18.9 million in 2001 to \$57 million in 2004. In 2005, out of the agency's \$89.1 million assistance to the Philippines, \$54 million or 60 percent has been allocated to Mindanao: \$23.2 million or 43 percent is for conflict-reduction activities in Mindanao; \$9.7 million is for improving access to quality education; \$8 million or 15 percent is for renewable energy projects and environmental conservation; \$8.3 million or 15 percent is for family planning and health.

After the peace agreement with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was reached, USAID gave priority to assisting former MNLF fighters become entrepreneurs such as rice and corn farmers, fishermen, and seaweed growers. The Livelihood Enhancement and Peace Program provided production inputs, train-

**\$54 million**  
FROM USAID  
IN 2005



**REDUCING POVERTY:** British Ambassador Peter Beckingham in a talk with NGOs supporting ARMM

# THE GOAL IS TO IMPROVE THE WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS OF MUSLIMS...AND THE UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN MUSLIM AND NON-MUSLIM COMMUNITIES

— Ambassador Peter Beckingham of the United Kingdom

ing, marketing assistance, post-harvest facilities to around 28,000 former MNLF combatants. There were around 40,000 combatants at the time of the signing of the 1996 peace accord.

Take the case of Mora Seraji, a former MNLF combatant. When this writer visited her in September 2004 in the village of Tongbangkaw in Tawi-Tawi, USAID had just completed three new, large solar dryers on bamboo stilts, which made it possible for Seraji and other seaweed farmers to dry more seaweed and sell them at better prices.

Most seaweed farmers used to dry their produce on plastic mats or tarpaulins spread over beach sand. This method results in soil or sand contaminating the seaweed thus giving wholesale seaweed traders the excuse to buy farmers' products at a lower price.

*"Maganda yung bilad dito kasi malaki at walang dumi, walang reduction (It's good to use the solar dryer because it's big and there's no dirt, no price reduction),"* said Seraji, President of the Dayang Balukbuk Multi-Purpose Cooperative. *"Kung doon sa buhangin, malaki ang deduction. (If we dry over sand, we get a big price deduction)."*

A kilo of dirt-free dried seaweed can be sold for P32 per kilo in Tawi-Tawi's capital, Bongao. Contaminated seaweed sells at around one-third less at P22 per kilo. "With proper drying and handling of seaweeds, planters can reduce overall financial losses by about 15 percent," said a GEM project profile.

Depending on the size of their farm and amount of capital invested, seaweed farmers earn between P7,000 and P15,000 for every harvest of seaweed, according to Bidin Pangilan, barangay chair of Tongbangkaw. One cropping cycle of seaweed takes two to three months. There are four cropping cycles a year.

The 250-square-meter solar dryers, each costing around half a million pesos, are among 800 small

and medium-scale community infrastructure projects planned for the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and conflict-affected areas of Mindanao under the GEM 2 Program.

While GEM 1 concentrated on providing only technical assistance, GEM 2 seeks to address the people's need for small, community infrastructure projects such as boat landings, culverts, bridge or road upgrades or repairs. These projects are undertaken in partnership with local governments, farmers, fisherfolk organizations and women's cooperatives. Of the 800 projects, 275 have been completed, benefiting nearly 250,000 families or around one million people.

GEM 2 has a special focus not just on Mindanao, but on conflict-affected areas of the south. The second phase of GEM seeks to help consolidate peace and promote a more inclusive economic growth in Mindanao.

## AID FROM AUSTRALIA

When NEWSBREAK had a chance interview with Australian Ambassador Tony Hely in November 2005, he had just arrived from a visit to some Australian aid projects in Mindanao. He had opened a new community learning center in Mindanao as part of the Australian-funded Basic Education

Assistance for Mindanao (BEAM). "Of our overall aid program to the Philippines—it is the fifth or sixth biggest in the world—A\$63 million a year, 60 percent goes to Mindanao," Hely said.

"We're doing an enormous amount of work there to improve teacher training in basic education and to improve the capacity and the quality of education, improve the access of disadvantaged people to basic education," he said. "In addition to basic education, we're also doing a lot in vocational-technical education. We're doing a lot of work down there to link educational institutions to the sort of skills requirements that the industry sectors demand and so that the people and the kids that go through vocational education are more employable."

The first A\$4.85-million BEAM program focused on improving basic education in Regions 11, 12, and the ARMM. It has followed it up with a second, four-year

A\$21.66 million program.

Australia was the largest donor to the United

Nations Multi-Donor Fund for the 1996 peace agreement with the MNLF, providing A\$34 million since 1997. Hely said that the program resulted in "peace building initiatives in 160 communities and territories run by the MNLF."

The first three phases of this multi-donor program helped improve the living conditions and livelihood opportunities of MNLF members. Australia is following this up with the five-year, A\$17-million Action for Conflict Transformation (ACT) for Peace Program. Hely said this new program aims to reach out to other post-conflict, conflict-affected and conflict-vulnerable communities, especially indigenous peoples.

Australia has also contributed half-a-million Australian dollars to the World Bank Trust Fund to support confidence-building measures in the ongoing peace talks between the Philippine government and another rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Hely said the World Bank has already raised US\$2 to 3 million for the Trust Fund. Part of the money will be used to build the capacity of the MILF's Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA).

"One of the problems with the MNLF peace agreement [was that] there was no particular central institution that could deliver the development that was the result of the peace agreement. And what we're trying to do this time is to build the BDA...so at the time the peace agreement is signed, you'd have a body there that is already well-equipped to start to deliver the development assistance," Hely said.

## JAPAN ODA

Japan, the Philippines' largest aid donor, has belatedly joined the foreign donor community's focus on Mindanao. It was only in January 2002 when Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi announced a new policy that Japan would like to "actively cooperate in reducing poverty and preventing conflicts in Mindanao." Japan has committed US\$400 million for a support package to Mindanao. In August 2003, the Japanese government revised its ODA charter and made peace building a priority concern.

Unlike the US government's small but high-impact grant aid projects, Japanese aid to Mindanao has been focused historically on big, expensive infrastructure projects such as the 10,000-ha. Malitubog-Maridagao irrigation project in North Cotabato and Maguindanao. This project started in 1989 during the Aquino government and is still not completely finished due to security problems and escalating costs. The Japanese embassy said "Japan finds it difficult to implement a number of large-scale projects in Mindanao due to its peace and order situation."

Unlike the high-impact aid projects of the US and Australia, which are mostly grants, the bulk of Japan's aid projects in Mindanao are expensive loan projects. Out of Japan's cumulative assistance to Mindanao worth \$2.8 billion, \$2.6 billion or 92 per-

£8.5 million FROM THE UK (2005 to 2008)

## ODA BY REGION 2000-2002 In US\$ billion

AREA COVERAGE	2000		2001		2002	
	Amount	% of Total	Amount	% of Total	Amount	% of Total
Luzon	4.8	36	5.4	41	3.9	33
Visayas	1.2	9	1.3	10	1.0	8
Mindanao	0.945	7	0.900	7	0.856	7
Nationwide/ Multi-Regional	6.2	47	5.4	41	6.0	51
Total	13.31	100	13.17	100	11.86	100

Source: National Economic and Development Authority-Project Monitoring Staff. Annual ODA Portfolio Reviews from 2000-2002, Pasig City, Philippines.

Note: Totals may not sum up due to rounding-off.



cent are yen loan projects. Japanese officials have defended their portfolio of large-scale projects by saying they have merely been responding to requests of the Philippine government.

## SUPPORT FROM THE UK

For its part, the government of the United Kingdom recently made a “strategic priority” for its ODA program to work with Islamic communities. It launched in 2003 an initiative called Global Opportunities Fund—Engaging the Islamic World Programme (GOF-EIW). It has committed £8.5 million a year for the program from 2005 to 2008.

“It’s an emphasis which goes beyond Iraq and is one that has been there for the last two or three years actually. I think the trigger, to be candid, were the events of 2001, September 11<sup>th</sup>,” British Ambassador Peter Beckingham told NEWSBREAK. “It’s something that we’re doing not just in the Philippines again but also in other countries. We’ve got similar programs with the Islamic communities in the Middle East. It’s an overall global program targeted on countries where there are significant Muslim populations.”

“The goal is to improve the working conditions and living conditions of Muslims. And to improve the understanding between Muslim communities and non-Muslim communities, and in some circumstances, to help their rehabilitation,” he said.

The first GOF-EIW is a P50-million training program which seeks “to strengthen the capacity of local government units in the ARMM in accessing central government and donor funding in order to implement projects that address local community needs.” Training courses for 55 Local Poverty Reduction Teams in the ARMM began in 2004 and will end in 2007.

The second GOF-EIW is a P33-million Peace Enabling Actions for Community Empowerment in Lanao del Norte and Lanao del Sur. The project will support the needs of Muslim and Christian communities affected by displacement through alternative sources of livelihood and relief and humanitarian support services.

Most of the major bilateral and multilateral donors have vowed to put in more money in Mindanao if a peace deal is signed with the MILF. **N**



# Wealth from the Sea

SEAWEED HAS CHANGED THE LIVES OF FORMER REBELS.  
BUT THE INDUSTRY IS LOSING ITS DOMINANCE  
TO MORE AGGRESSIVE PLAYERS.

BY LALA RIMANDO

**Y**ousuff Hasinon, a former rebel, now has a different cause. Every day, he sets out before dawn from Pangapuyan, an island village east of Zamboanga City, to the deep waters of Sulu Sea to tend to his seaweed farm in the open sea.

Seaweed farming is “a lot of hard work and patience,” Hasinon told NEWSBREAK in an interview last year. The seaweed that he harvests after 30 days finds its way to things we use almost daily: toothpaste, shampoo, milk, cosmetics, ice cream, beers and cola, pet foods, even medicines. It acts as a binder, moisture holder, gelling agent, and stabilizer to these products.

Producing seaweed for raw material is a US\$1.5-billion industry worldwide. The Philippines is the third biggest producer, next only to South Korea and Japan. But the country is the largest producer of red seaweeds, particularly the *Eucheuma cottonnii* species, accounting for 68 percent of the

world market’s supply. Around 40,000 Filipino families depend on the seaweed industry for a living while 10,000 employees work in various seaweed processing plants in the country.

Farmers from the island provinces of Sulu, Tawi-tawi, and Basilan account for about 70 percent of total raw seaweed harvest in the country. These provinces are hotbeds of insurgency, and it is no coincidence that seaweed farming has attracted many former Moro National Liberation Front combatants since the group signed a peace agreement with the government in 1996.

With the help of donor agencies such as the United States Agency

for International Development (USAID), the ex-rebels were trained to farm in the seas and trade their produce. This helped them sustain the schooling of their children and provide a better life for their families.

## SLUGGISH GROWTH

But the seaweed industry is at a crossroads. The Philippines’ 80-percent domination of the world supply of wild seaweeds three years ago is now down to 60 percent. This has alarmed local industry players who fear the very aggressive competition.

Studies show that seaweed farming is best suited for Asia. Wild seaweeds grow best in areas near the equator. In 1966, the Philippines became an early player in the global seaweed exporting market when the United Nations endorsed its wild seaweeds to American and European markets. During that period, Filipinos exported seaweeds raw, until local and foreign investors put up pro-

cessing plants here. Most of the plants are located in Cebu, where carageenan—the powdered extract derived from processing the seaweed—is shipped out to various markets abroad.

Right now, the seaweed industry—both raw seaweeds and carageenan—is an important export earner. According to the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, the 128,159 metric tons that the Philippines shipped out in 2004 accounted for 21 percent of the country's total fisheries exports.

In the past three years, the production growth of the local seaweed industry has been sluggish at an average of 2.6 percent a year. In contrast, Indonesia, our most aggressive competitor but still a far second, boasts of a 21 percent production growth rate since 2001. From only 30,000 metric tons in 2001, it has upped production to 55,000 metric tons last year.

Indonesia has a coastline equivalent to three times that of the Philippines. It has more farmers engaged in seaweed farming. Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia, have been collectively eating into the Philippines' market share. They have taken over the 5 percent share which the Philippines has been losing every year.

Alfredo Isidro, seaweed and aquaculture development advisor to the USAID-funded Growth with Equity in Mindanao program, attributed the industry's lethargic performance to the sector's many problems—high costs of production, transport, hauling, shipping, and marketing.

He said these problems force exporters and processors to buy from farmers or traders who offer their raw seaweeds at a lowest price.

## CALAMITY STRIKES

In Zamboanga, where most of the farmers from the nearby islands bring their produce, the farm gate price of seaweed is at P27 per kilo. At the beginning of the year, the going rate was P30 per kilo. The P3 difference translates to thousands of pesos in lost income by the seaweed farmers. It does not help that seaweed farmers and traders believe that they are at the losing end since export data show that carageenan is being exported at about P80 per kilo. This has discouraged farmers from increasing production or expanding their farms.

But, since the industry is about

a commodity product, price is the king.

While Indonesia's seaweed has lower quality, which is measured by the moisture content, it is cheaper than the Philippines'.

FMC, the biggest seaweed processor in the world, gets some of its seaweed raw materials from Indonesia and then exports it to its processing plant in Cebu. Farley Baricuatro, of FMC BioPolymer Indo-Pacific Sourcing Center, told NEWSBREAK during a recent business conference in Tawi-Tawi, that FMC can buy raw seaweeds from Indonesia that is up to \$150 per metric ton cheaper than those that are sold by Filipino farmers. "[Raw seaweed] is more than 60 percent of our total costs. Can you blame us for looking for cheaper sources?"

Hadji Adam Omar, chair of the Western Mindanao Seaweed Industry Development Foundation, said Filipinos could not afford to compete over prices against the more aggressive producers. He said a lot of the Filipino farmers have not yet recovered from the big loss they incurred during the strong typhoon in August 2001 which damaged their farming implements like rafts, where seaweed seedlings are hung to grow within 30 to 45 days. A second calamity struck that year—a seaweed disease referred to by the locals as "ice-ice." A whitish germ that rapidly eats the seaweed until it falls off from strings attached to the raft into the deep sea, this almost wiped out the farms.

Kadhafi Jaylani, a seaweed farmer based in Zamboanga City, vividly remembers those days. "We barely had anything to feed our

families. Some would even sell their seaweeds still wet and salty, fetching only P3.50 per kilo, when we could have waited for four more days to dry them and sell it at P30 per kilo," he said in the local dialect. It was a stark contrast to the heydays of seaweed farming and trading when some Muslims earned enough to afford joining the holy pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.

Access to financing would have been the easy solution. But banks and financing companies shied away from them. A farm in the water is not an acceptable collateral. Jaylani claimed they were even conned by government financial institutions. In 2004, they had their pictures taken during the ceremonial handover of a P2-million check from a government official, which was supposed to help revive the operations of a group of seaweed farmers based in Zamboanga. The financing never came. Months of unproductive waiting led them to turn to the traders who provided them a revolving credit in exchange for assured volume come harvest time.

## ALTERNATIVE WAYS

Isidro would like to look at the big picture. Aside from improving the financing aspect of the sector, he said farmers should form co-operatives and access funding for the establishment of processing plants right there in their provinces, instead of allowing the capitalists to enjoy the big margins. "That way, we can add value to their raw dried seaweeds and will mean more income to the farmers," said Isidro. One of the suggested products is seaweed chips.

However, a lot needs to be in

place first before these could even materialize.

Unlike Cebu, which is more industrialized and is accessed by feeder ships that carry export products destined to different countries, Zamboanga, the nearest port to the Muslim seaweed farmers, is not on the radar screen of these ships. Even the established processing plants owned by Filipino-Chinese capitalists in Zamboanga still bring their export papers for processing in Manila and their carageenan to Cebu because Zamboanga is not recognized as an international port.

An aggravating factor, the cost of power and other infrastructure requirements to set up an industrial plant, say in any of the island provinces of Basilan, Sulu and Tawi-tawi, is one of the highest in the country. Power costs alone account for one of the biggest chunks in the total operating expenses of a processing plant.

Baricuatro doubts if these plans can take off. "First of all, you don't produce for the sake of producing. You should always think of what the market wants and needs. Does the market want seaweed chips? Will *Eucheuma* still be the preferred species? Will there be an alternative to seaweed as a raw material to the cosmetic, food and other industries that it feeds? Who will buy their products?"

While the applications for carageenan continue to grow—scientists have recently been experimenting on it for drugs that fight the human immunodeficiency virus and the dengue virus—the plight of the small seaweed farmers will be determined by their size and influence in the world market.

The capitalists' experience during the early 1990s should be instructive. At that time, the excellent performance of the Philippines' carageenan was threatening the dominance of monopolies based in the US and Denmark. These countries mounted a campaign to block Philippine carageenan in Europe and then in the US, claiming that it was not suitable for human consumption. After a bitter struggle, the local industry prevailed.

Meantime, a comprehensive solution to address the threats to the position of the Philippines in the global seaweed industry has yet to be reached. ■





# Women Power

BY RUFA GUIAM

FORMER REBELS RISE TO BECOME MAINSTREAM LEADERS

## HADJA "BAI" BAINON

*From Guns to Government*

**T**he story of Hadja "Bai" Bainon G. Karon is one for the books. As a young co-ed at Notre Dame University in Cotabato City in the 1970s, she was confronted with several incidents that manifested anti-Muslim prejudice. This exposure convinced her to become an officer of a student group that protested discrimination against Muslims.

Her experience would come in handy when armed conflict erupted between the forces of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Philippine government. After graduating from college, she decided to leave all the comforts of her middle-class home to become a member of the MNLF. This was in 1972. The MNLF was then recruiting members from among the young Bangsamoro intelligentsia, both men and women, to take part in the armed struggle for self-determination. She rose to become the chairperson of the MNLF Women's Committee.

Hadja Bai's frail build and pleasant, almost gentle demeanor belie an inner strength that has allowed her to overcome tremendous, almost insurmountable challenges and painful experiences. She was one of those who fought shoulder to shoulder with her male MNLF comrades in the battle of Lebak against military troops. This left her with a bullet lodged in her leg.

More tragically, she lost five brothers and her husband, Datu Ibrahim Sema, in the war. Datu Ibrahim is now considered one of the MNLF's martyrs and is honored with a camp named after him in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao.



LUIS LUMANAG

On Sept. 2, 1996, the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) was signed by the leadership of the MNLF and the president at that time, Fidel V. Ramos. A historic event for the Bangsamoro mujahideen (freedom fighters), the signing of the FPA paved the way for the influx of various packages of multi-donor assistance to the MNLF, their families, and communities, especially those affected by the war.

This was also a landmark event in the life of Bai, opening windows of opportunities to continue the work for the cause of the Bangsamoro. But this time, it was not through war but through social development, and through uplifting the quality of life of her fellow Bangsamoro, especially the women.

By sheer persistence, hard work, and commitment to make a

difference in the lives of her fellow women in the MNLF and their families and communities, Bai pioneered the formation of several women's cooperatives in the conflict-affected areas in the Special Zone of Peace and Development. As if this was not enough, she also initiated the organization of a federation of all these small cooperatives in the areas which she used to visit as the chairperson of the MNLF Women's Committee. Her painstaking efforts paid off: the Federation of United Mindanawan Bangsamoro Women Multi-Purpose Cooperatives was born in 1999, three years after the Philippine government and the MNLF signed the Final Peace Agreement.

She also became the social work and development secretary in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao from 2002 to 2005.

Hadja Bai is one of the first MNLF

leaders given the privilege of participating in several capability-building training programs and exchange/study tours to different places, both within and outside the Philippines. She echoed these experiences among her fellow women and thus started to work toward the formation of the Federation.

"We have become what we are now, empowered and capacitated to make our own decisions and to make plans based on our own decisions. We could not have attained this without Hadja Bai. She has really not left us behind." This is how some of the women in the federation describe Hadja Bai.

She has caused the empowerment of her fellow Bangsamoro women. Perhaps this is her greatest contribution to the Bangsamoro communities—she is an empowered woman empowering others.



MARK NAVALES

## WAHIDA "TITA" ABTAHI

*Representing Mindanao Women*

**T**he second of three children (all girls) of Maguindanaoan couple, Wahida "Tita" Ab-tahi used to be apathetic to issues and concerns confronting society. After all, Tita's parents, both professionals, made sure she and her sisters got a good college education and eventually married and had children of their own.

Like many young scions of middle-class Maguindanaoan Muslim families, Tita went to Catholic-run private schools and led a relatively comfortable life. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine she would be what she is now, passionately involved in a women's organization that seeks to empower its members economically, and in the process attain a peaceful and developed society.

Something happened in the early 1970s that changed her out-

look, albeit rather gradually: the MNLF was born. While not actively involved in the movement, her parents were quite sympathetic to the MNLF cause. But her father, who was deputized as sheriff in General Santos City, could not express such support openly since he was a government official.

While the MNLF struggle struck a chord in Tita's sense of obligation as a Muslim, she was not so impassioned about it at that time. She was just thankful her parents were able to send her and her two other sisters to college. In her case, she had two bachelor's degrees: a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from a Catholic university in Davao City and another degree in International Relations from Mindanao State University (MSU) in Marawi City.

In MSU-Marawi, she met a dashing Muslim man, a Tausug, from Sulu and decided she would spend the rest of her life with him. This was a major turning point in her life. Her husband, convinced of

the MNLF cause, joined the struggle early in their marriage, in 1978. Tita's husband soon became the MNLF external information officer. This job took him to other countries. Like any good wife, Tita went with him, wherever he was assigned.

The first few years of their marriage were spent in various places abroad. For all these years, Tita was the dutiful wife, bearing and rearing children. Later, she had to stay put in General Santos City to take care of her six children. While her husband was away, she had to fend for herself and the kids, and learn how to support her family. Her husband did not have a "normal" job and was not paid regularly. So she applied for a teaching job at MSU-General Santos City.

Her teaching experience, coupled with her being a "single parent," became the wellspring of her newfound desire to become empowered. As a mother of six young children whose husband was frequently out of the country, she had to make some practical decisions everyday. However, such decisions were bound by the limits of providing for a family whose head had to serve a cause greater than their own family's interest—the liberation of the Bangsamoro.

In the early 1970s, Tita befriended Bainon Karon, who was then studying at Notre Dame University in Cotabato City. Tita knew about Bai's involvement with the MNLF and respected her friend's decision.

Several decades later, the two friends were reunited after the signing of the FPA in 1996. MNLF commanders, including Tita's husband, were provided several livelihood and income-generating projects. Her husband received various agri-based livelihood projects that were implemented near the family farm in Tupi, South Cotabato, about 20 kilometers away from General Santos City.

During the first few years of the implementation of these projects, Tita's husband was awarded a scholarship to Libya, and she had to manage all the projects that he left behind. This situation forced Tita to learn the basics of the project implementation cycle.

At this time, Hadja Bainon Karon was already going the rounds of provinces and cities in the ARMM to convince the women of the need to organize them-

selves in order to access development funds.

When they met again, the two became inseparable. Tita became some kind of a protégé as far as Hadja Bainon was concerned. Thus every time Hadja Bai was invited to attend trainings and other capacity-building seminars, she made sure Tita was with her.

Tita was then convinced to head the Federation of United Mindanawan Bangsamoro Women Multi-Purpose Cooperatives or Federation after the regional governor, MNLF chairman Nur Misuari, appointed Bainon as the secretary of ARMM-Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD).

This became another turning point in Tita's life. Because Hadja Bai became very busy with the problematic DSWD-ARMM, she needed someone she could trust. So she convinced Tita to head the Federation regional office.

The route to Tita's empowerment seems to have started when she was left to fend for her own. Circumstances pushed her to discover her own capacities.

Now as Tita reflects on her personal trek toward empowerment, she muses: "I feel good about the way I am able to make decisions for myself, to do things I haven't done before and to plan for change. It is a nice, gratifying feeling. It becomes more gratifying when I realize that I have also helped in making my fellow Bangsamoro women achieve what they want to achieve, not for their husbands or children, but for themselves. Women can do a lot of things more and they can strive to achieve even beyond what is expected of them."

In recognition of her commitment to improve the welfare of Bangsamoro women through the Federation, Tita has been appointed to represent Bangsamoro women in the National Anti-Poverty Council (NAPC). The NAPC is an advisory council to the President regarding how to address poverty. Her mandate includes working for the concerns of all women from Mindanao, not just Muslims. She is now known as the Mindanao women representative in the NAPC—quite a feat for someone who used to be housewife, mother, teacher, and the all-around factotum in her household. **N**





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# 'Muslims should be educated, willing to negotiate and accommodate, to benefit from an open system'

**S**urin Pitsuwan of the Democratic Party is a member of the Thai Parliament and served as minister of foreign affairs from 1992 to 2001. Harvard-educated (Ph.D. in political science) and a leading intellectual in Southeast Asia, he is widely regarded as one of the region's most influential voices. He was in Manila recently to speak at a seminar on the "Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Southeast Asia." He spoke with NEWSBREAK's Marites Dañguilan Vitug. Excerpts:

**You seem to be the most natural leader for the moderate Muslims in Thailand and the rest of Southeast Asia. Is there such an organized group?**

There is no such established group. We live it.

Once you organize a group, you'll be perceived as "with us" or "not with us." It's difficult. It's better to be independent and be able to express our thoughts freely without the affiliation.

It also has to do with the leadership of Thailand. He [Prime Minister Thaksin] would be very reluctant to tolerate alternative opinion. If you're a group espousing a different line of thought, you'd be perceived as a threat.

**What can a network of Muslim moderates do?**

They will create space for moderate Muslim intellectuals. But they need to link to the grassroots, find tremendous resource to create livelihood that would be attractive to the people in the grassroots, be in competition with the radical *ulama* on the ground who are talking about injustice, the lack of health care, lack of education. They are inciting everyday.

**What do you see as your role?**

I'm acting as agitator. I have stepped out into the open and I show that life is not threatening, that Islam is not diluted even if you're out there competing with others.

**Is there an anti-Muslim sentiment in Thailand—the way there is here in the Philippines?**

It used not to be prominent—but now, yes! The Muslim is seen

as a potential "troublemaker." Before, things were so calm and harmonious. The Constitution of 1997, for the first time, removed Buddhism as state religion. That was a direct intervention of the King himself who sensed that it would be more comfortable for peoples of other faiths to live in a state structure that doesn't have an official religion.

Thailand was harmonious in many ways. It was a model of integration in Southeast Asia—with the Chinese, Muslims, and Christians.

**What happened?**

All was good until 2001 [when Thaksin became prime minister]. And partly, it was the international environment, what was going on in Aceh, Mindanao, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine, an identification with victims of injustice.

In Thailand, there's lack of participation in the system. Muslims feel marginalized. And then came the CEO mentality from the center, the "I-know-everything" syndrome.

**What should be the approach to southern Thailand?**

First and foremost, get rid of this mindset that Bangkok knows best, that one person can prescribe the medicine for the malaise of the country. Let people participate and be part of the solution to the problem. Education is very important. Then, economic development can come after people are qualified.

A Truth Commission should be set up to find out what happened, how many lives have been lost, how many injustices have been made in the name of security and peace. The commission should



LUIS LIMANAG

aim at establishing an acceptable version of what happened. Without a clearing of the past, you can't walk into the future.

**How's media coverage of Muslims in Thailand?**

The headlines are antagonistic, divisive, unkind, and sensational. But the columns, editorials, and opinion pieces are sober and analytical.

**Muslims want to preserve their identity. But you've talked of multiple identities.**

Before you can have that comfort or luxury of being what you are—a good citizen of the state, member of society, it would take some sophistication. We still have a strong identity with the smaller unit.

The best solution would be to have multiple identities. Society has developed in so complex a fashion so that it's difficult to have just one identity. In Thailand, I am Surin Pitsuwan in the official circle, but when I go South, I'm Abdul Balim Bin Ismael. I feel comfortable in both. The problem is, before you get to that comfort level, you have to go through a lot of transformation.

**Please talk more about the tensions in Muslim societies.**

There are so many dimensions of conflicts within the Islamic com-

munity around the world: Islamic community and the outside world; Islamic community with modernity which has been complicated by globalization.

We're changing too fast to a point where if you're not prepared, you'll feel disoriented. In the end, you'll feel alienated. Once you feel that, you'll go back to your roots, your first identity, where you're more comfortable.

**What's the impact of democracy?**

Democracy is not the answer to all these problems. The system has to be just, transparent, and distributive. The system must provide space.

Muslims should be educated, willing to negotiate and accommodate, and be equipped to participate to be able to benefit from an open system. Muslims in a democracy should not be absolutists.

**How do you develop tolerance?**

The mindset should be: My interpretation could be wrong and I'm responsible for it. I should not come to judgment of your interpretation.

There should be a sense of fallibility, that I have a 20-percent chance of being wrong. Once you establish that as an operating principle, you'll have a chance of attaining a balanced society. **N**





# Thailand's Underground War

RECENT VIOLENT INCIDENTS SUGGEST A BOLDER, MORE URBAN NATURE TO GUERRILLA OPERATIONS



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY RYAN ANSON

**I**n southern Thailand's bustling city of Yala, weekend street markets spring to life the moment mid-day prayers end. Everything from giant leafy tobacco to recorded sermons from the Middle East are hawked off rickety tables propped up in dingy alleyways. Women mix iced coffee in smoky restaurants where old men dressed in austere, Arab-styled gowns congregate to talk about the latest news coming out of local provinces, Iraq, and the rest of the Islamic world. A few kilometers down the road, thousands of worshippers pour out of Yala Islamic College after listening to a fiery lecture by Ismael Lutphi, a Saudi-trained cleric known for preaching conservative Wahhabist doctrine.

As motorbike traffic bottles up around a railway crossing, Wamchai Chanchung, a member of the Royal Thai Police's Special Action Force, shifts his gaze toward a row of dilapidated houses on one side of the tracks

where he and six other officers patrol each day. Fragments of glass cling to soggy frames that protrude haphazardly from the outside walls

of darkened rooms. Chanchung keeps an eye on the windows, and an index finger on his rifle's trigger.

"Over there," says Chanchung, pointing to the shadow-filled shacks. "That's where they could ambush us from." While nothing happens, the young security officer stands his guard—watching, waiting—as passengers board a

## IMAGES

train bound for Malaysia.

Aside from a handful of shoot-and-scoot assassinations in distant parts of town, Yala has been spared from most large-scale attacks since Islamic insurgents renewed their campaign of violence in Thailand's three border provinces early last year. A daring raid by gunmen on a Thai army weapons depot and the torching of two dozen government schools almost two years ago triggered the latest round of conflict in the south, an area wrought with poverty and separatist activity. More than 820 people have died in the small provinces of Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala which are home to 90 percent of Thailand's five million Muslims.

Unlike two decades ago when the Pattani United Liberation Organization led the call for an independent Islamic country, not one group has claimed responsibility for the now-daily assassinations of government employees, security forces, Buddhist monks, and even Muslims seen collaborating with the state.

Yet, for the most part, the city of Yala has enjoyed relative calmness.

That all changed recently just as the city was about to go to bed. At about 7 p.m. on July 14, roughly 60 insurgents targeted hotels, restaurants, shops, and a cinema with bombs, guns, and Molotov cocktails after plunging the city into darkness by bombing a power station. A policeman and a civilian were killed while more than 20 others were seriously injured. The group of militants then peppered the roads with spikes to thwart a government pursuit, and escaped without sustaining any casualties.

The next day, Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra bypassed Parliament and issued an executive decree unilaterally declaring a renewable state of emergency for three months in all southern conflict areas. Although martial law has already been firmly entrenched since January of last year, the new declaration places all security issues in the hands of Thaksin and his Bangkok colleagues rather than the Southern Border Province Peacebuilding Command, a special unit composed of army and police units which previously coordinated all counter-insurgency efforts.

"These people want only violence. It means they do not want

#### WEDDING AND SONGS:

Sophia Awear cuddles her niece as Sofar watches guests arrive at a wedding reception in Yala. Right photos show a soldier questioning a group of boys and students singing at the beginning of their classes.



**WARMING UP:** Students line up for morning exercises in Raman (right). Photos below show a marine patrol cruising a district in Yala and an instructor suspected of belonging to the National Revolutionary Front.







to talk," Thaksin told the press after an emergency Cabinet meeting.

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the newly formed National Reconciliation Commission, a body tasked to find peaceful solutions to the unrest, immediately expressed dismay at what they see as aggressive moves to curtail civil liberties. People living in areas under the state of emergency can be arrested and detained without charge for 30 days. Their movements are restricted and phones tapped. Newspapers and radio or television broadcasts may also be banned if they use stories or pictures deemed by the authorities to provoke further violence.

In a statement, the NHRC said the decree gives Thaksin too much power, frees the government from checks and balances, and violates part of the Thai Constitution as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which the country ratified in 1996.

Thaksin, a former police chief whose war against drugs during the first two years of his tenure resulted in the summary execution of 2,000 suspects, adamantly defended his decision to give himself sweeping powers to fight an ostensibly young and elusive enemy.

"These individuals have no understanding about the concept of a nation," Thaksin said during a press interview about the suspects who are thought to have attended Rajabhat University in Yala. "They are juvenile delinquents who got carried away by youthful high spirits to perform foolhardy deeds, in spite of their good education."

The first major assault on Yala's downtown commercial area comes a little more than a year after another highly-coordinated insurgent attack left 112 people dead, including 32 young militants who sought refuge at the historic Krue Se mosque and were later mowed down by government troops with heavy machine guns and grenades. It also signifies a recent pattern in the insurgents' choice of targets. Whereas many of the daily killings usually occur in smaller towns and on rubber plantations, recent incidents, including a car bombing in the seedy town of Sungai Kolok in February and the simultaneous Hat Yai airport and hotel bombings in April, suggest a bolder, more urban nature to guerrilla operations.

As the conflict escalates in densely populated towns like Yala, the controversial executive decree will surely bare its teeth for some time to come. **N**

# The Involved American

'I AM MUCH MORE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT THE REGION AND THE PROSPECTS FOR POSITIVE CHANGE THAN I HAD EVER EXPECTED TO BE'



BY JONATHAN BEST

**M**any months ago, I was asked by the Synergeia Foundation to go to the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) to report on an education reform project initiated by a coalition of progressive Philippine educators. I have been to Mindanao many times over the years, on my own and with Filipino friends. I made all these trips before the 9/11 attacks on the United States and America's "War on Terror."

The thought of being a White American traveling into Mindanao's conflict zone made me uneasy. I was aware of Americans around the world and in the Philippines being kidnapped by Islamic extremists. But when my friends at Synergeia suggested they would inform the US Embassy that I was going to Mindanao, I said, "Please don't." I felt much safer traveling quietly with Filipino friends. When I found out that intrepid businessman Washington Sycip, well into his seventies, would be traveling with us on his own, I stopped worrying.

Our job was to help initiate education reform in Maguindanao, focusing on improving reading and math skills, starting at the local community level. Synergeia has already secured a major United States Agency for International Development (USAID) grant, which will eventually make up 40 percent of the funding. Other funds are from the Ford Foundation, Synergeia itself, and several local institutions, for a grand total of roughly US\$ 6 million to be spent over three years. From Marawi City to Maguindanao, 58,000 children in the first three grades of primary school throughout the ARMM region stand to benefit from the project.

Synergeia works on the basic premise that if everyone concerned with the terrible state of education in the local community is given a direct stake in reforming it, they will all pitch in. International test scores and local studies prove public education in the Philippines has declined drastically over the last thirty years, a result of obvious factors like poor funding, corruption, and rapid population growth. In Mindanao, the situation has been compounded by violence and religious discrimination.

Public knowledge of the facts, a transparent bureaucracy, and community-wide participation are the keys to reforming the system. The first step is to get the concerned parties together: parents, teachers, school officials, the Department of Education, local politicians, and members of the private sector.

For our first meeting at Notre Dame of Marbel in Koronadal, we gathered together the mayors of three towns with impoverished school districts along with local officials and educators. After an inspiring talk on the value of public education by Washington Sycip, we turned the meeting into a workshop. The attendees discussed their dreams for their children, what they saw as major problems affecting the schools, and what they could personally contribute to the cause of education.

What emerged from the workshop as a primary goal was for the children to stay in school through the sixth grade. At present more than 70 percent drop out due to poverty, malnutrition, child labor, early marriage, disillusionment, and various hardships. Quality education was also a major goal as was the desire for the kids to learn discipline, respect for hard work, moral values, and how to live in peace.

On the other hand, overcrowding, unqualified corrupt teachers, and lack of classrooms, desks, and instructional materials were listed as major problems.

As Dr. Nene Guevara, Synergeia director, went around the room to solicit pledges of support from participants, mayors pledged increased financing and better Special Education Fund tax collection, school board heads pledged

greater transparency, teachers pledged better quality of instruction, and parents pledged to motivate their kids and push their neighbors to get involved. The energy came from the local level, coalescing around the new information and a new sense of urgency Synergeia's forum had created.

A much larger "education summit" is in the works, as well as the setting up of permanent sectoral groups to start the long process of systemic reform.

The local and foreign funding funneled through Synergeia is meant only to function as a catalyst for sustainable reforms in public education. A great deal can be done when people's basic attitudes towards education are changed. Taking responsibility for the current situation and ownership of the system at the local level is an important start.

When complex problems arise regarding such issues as health, malnutrition, or advanced teacher training, the Synergeia Foundation has a strong network of partners who can be called on to advise local groups and advocate specific causes. One community mentoring another multiplies the benefits of the initial funding geometrically.

I came away from our first meeting much more optimistic about the ARMM region and the prospects for positive change. My earlier fears seemed so unfounded. A week later, another horrendous bomb ripped through the public market in General Santos, spreading more misery and hate. Peace is still a long way off.

The American financial aid is in the hands of independent Filipino administrators. Despite prevailing cynicism, there still are many public and private professionals who are hardworking, ethical, and determined to help their communities prosper.

Major education reform, transparent government, and open community-wide dialogue are not far-fetched goals. They can be instituted town by town and province by province, and may even prove to be the essential formula for prosperity and a lasting peace in Mindanao. **N**



# My Travels to Mindanao

FEW FILIPINOS  
HAVE BASIC  
KNOWLEDGE  
ABOUT  
MINDANAO.  
HOW CAN ONE  
EXPECT A  
RESOLUTION TO  
THE PROBLEM?

BY JAN DE KOK

W

hen I first came to this country as Head of Delegation of the European Commission, one of my priorities was to visit the major European Commission-financed activities within the first 12 months of my assignment.

It was a shock to some of my staff that I wanted one of my first trips out of Manila to be in Mindanao. Others were delighted and saw it as reconfirmation of the importance of their work.

I went to Davao to familiarize myself with the Upland Development Program, which covers several provinces in Southern Mindanao (Davao del Sur, Davao Oriental, Compostela Valley, South Cotabato, and Sarangani). My first impression was positive. I was impressed by the excellent relations between the project staff and local government unit (LGU) officials and farmers in the area.

At the same time, I was confused. So many people had been advising me to be extremely cautious about traveling to Mindanao. My experience made me ask: Did these people really know what was happening "down there"?

On a subsequent visit to Mindanao, I invited my colleagues, the ambassadors of the European Union member-states in Manila, to join me. It was a three-day trip starting in Cotabato City, where we had discussions with the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) governor and many ARMM officials. At

the time, hostilities had escalated and, as a consequence, our armed escorts were plentiful. We visited faraway barangays in South Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat, stayed two nights in Koronadal, and ended up in General Santos for our flight back to Manila.

Most of the rural folks we met (i.e., both Muslims and Christians) were preoccupied with find-

ing an end to the conflict that directly affected their livelihood and seriously compromised their safety. They did not want to be combatants.

But what happened upon my return to Manila worried and frustrated me the most. I arrived in time to attend an official dinner hosted by the Chief Justice. I was seated at a table with senior representatives from the government, the judiciary, the legislature, and academe. I wanted to share with them my experiences of the last few days.

Some were quick to enter into a discussion but others expressed surprise that I had even dared to "venture into a dangerous area," asking whether I "had not been scared" and whether I "was all right." My first reaction was, "Did I miss anything?" "Had I been in any danger without realizing it?" I quickly answered these questions to myself with a resounding "No." It was frustrating because if these learned people had so little knowledge and appreciation of what went on in this particular part of their country, how can one expect a resolution to the problem?

On another trip to Mindanao, I had an experience of a different kind in the Caraga region. We (the European Commission) were publicly accused by a senior member of the security forces of assisting the rebel New People's Army (NPA).

I was surprised by the accusation. We finance a small NGO project, at the local LGU level, for delivery of basic health and education services. Supposedly, some of the children who attend classes or get treatment at the health center are siblings of alleged NPA sympathizers (or maybe even combatants).

But why should the teachers or

nurses ask the children whether their fathers are of a particular political color, religion, or belong to any movement before admitting them to classes or treating them for illnesses? We are in the business of helping to reduce poverty irrespective of the background of those in need.

Over the last three years since I arrived in the Philippines, I have traveled to many corners of the country, including many places in Mindanao. Although most Filipinos agree that it would be better to stop the fighting and to make peace, I am still surprised about how few Filipinos have even a basic knowledge about the situation of Mindanao and the history of settlement in the region.

It is gratifying to see that the current ceasefire in Muslim Mindanao is generally holding. But to achieve just and lasting peace, there must also be a better understanding among the population at large, not just among the few directly involved, about the real issues that need to be resolved.

In Europe, we experienced the devastation of two major wars in the last hundred years. After World War II, several of the directly affected countries agreed that this type of armed conflict should be avoided at all cost. It has taken many years, but we have achieved political, economic, and social stability never earlier experienced on the European continent.

This has been and remains possible because of continuous discussion, consensus-building, and a great sense of solidarity. We try to defuse conflicts before they become conflicts; share resources in an equitable way; and above all respect each other's culture, identity, and religion.

There are lessons in this for the Philippines: continue to implement the peace process (talk, don't fight) and confidence-building; respect each other's opinions, desires, and diversity; and work toward unity and a sustainable peace.

"Unity in diversity" is a slogan we use when describing the European integration process. It would not be a bad slogan for the Philippines, either. **N**



# Paintings, Sculpture

TEACHERS IN WAR-RAVAGED MINDANAO GO ON AN ART TRIP—VIA POWERPOINT

BY JOHN L. SILVA



My Powerpoint presentation flashed a photo of the bulbous Guggenheim Museum in New York and a loud collective “Aaaah!” came from the audience. A large Botero sculpture of a naked woman produced gasps, while a second century Greek statue of a nude athlete elicited shock and then some sexual bantering.

I was in Barira, a remote part of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), conducting an arts-and-culture program for several hundred Muslim public school teachers for Synergeia, a non-governmental education reform group.

Barira is a bumpy two-hour ride up into the verdant hills of western Mindanao from Cotabato City on the coast, past numerous heavily armed military checkpoints. Cable TV hasn't reached these parts.

My computer attached to an LCD projector attached to a portable generator was astonishing to many and I, the visitor from Manila, was a rare sight to behold. In a culturally surreal moment the teachers broke into an archaic rendition of “My Darling Clementine” as their way of greeting me.

I was in Mindanao because school children there have the

lowest literacy rates and the highest number of dropouts in the country. One problem is education resources from the central Manila government do not reach far-flung provinces. In Barira, they hadn't had a school textbook delivery since 1988.

Teachers are another problem. The yearly licensing examinations for elementary teachers in Mindanao produces a passing rate of 28 percent, consistently the lowest in the country. While in college, most of these teachers never had an arts or cultural appreciation course and if they did, it consisted of cutting letters out of colored paper to make posters.

In the United States, schools with a strong arts education curriculum show students getting overall higher test scores. In a poor country, arts education may seem like a luxury but if it can help in-



POWERPOINT WAR: The author (center) with teachers in Barira



crease test scores, why not? There are over 200 museums throughout the Philippines, many sadly underutilized yet are prime arts education centers. It makes good sense to teach teachers basic arts and cultural awareness so they can pass it on to their students.

For the past two years, my program was geared for mostly Christian teachers. For Mindanao, I edited my Powerpoint presentation to match my new audience. Muslim architecture and arts were included, cultural contribu-

tions emphasized, and a proud history of never being colonized accentuated.

It may have been a bouncy trip for the SUV I rode that morning to get to Barira but my inconvenience didn't compare with those of the participating teachers living in the outlying areas. Some left their houses at four in the morning to walk, ride motorized outriggers, transfer to tricycles, and squeeze into overloaded jeepneys that were stopped at checkpoints every two kilometers to reach the old munici-



# res, and Museums

DINT



pal building where my presentation was held. Even more touching was that they came on their free day and paid for their fares themselves.

For the seven hours, they went, as one teacher would later comment, “on a magic carpet ride to places they had only dreamt of.” I took them to the Shanghai Art Museum to review blue and white Imperial ware, to southern Spain to see vestiges of Muslim architecture, to New York’s Metropolitan Museum and its extensive Southeast Asian art collection.

Representational art showing the human body elicited gasps and nervous laughter, but it was also telling to me that the teachers by and large were tolerant of foreign art forms.

At one point, I showed a set of late 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs of Muslims in Mindanao taken by European and American anthropologists. This was the first time they had seen photos of their ancestors that far back.

A slight commotion developed in the back of the class and I asked



one of the teachers what aroused them. She promptly pointed to the women in the photos. “Sir, they are dancing and they have no veils,” she blurted in amazement. I looked and clicked through the other photos and was surprised by her observation. Without having to discuss the issue, I sensed from the murmurs going around that the teachers realized their current custom of wearing a veil and of being discouraged from dancing were not long-standing practices.

At four in the afternoon I ended the class having been told that the teachers had a long ride home. But they didn’t want to leave, their faces animated by the visual overload they received. They had many questions and in their survey forms expressed a desire to visit a museum one day.

I left Barira at dusk passing houses newly constructed by volunteer organizations. This town, and several nearby areas, was once a stronghold of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and was the scene of aerial bombings and a military assault five years ago. Many structures including homes and schools were destroyed leaving over 20,000 families homeless.

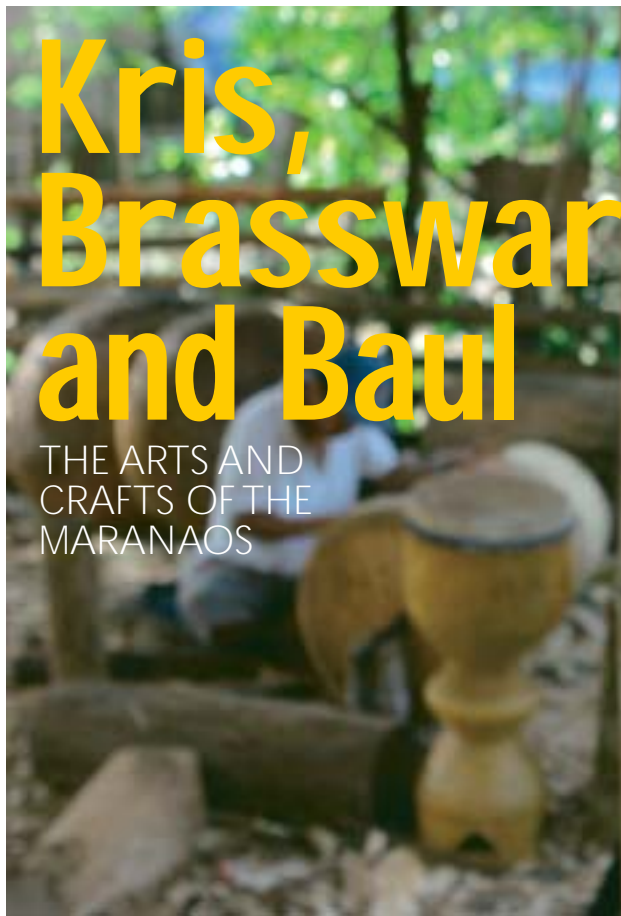
Driving back to Cotabato, encountering roadblocks once more, I sensed the all-out war five years ago isn’t over—and I’ve been drawn into it. I’m in a Powerpoint war with paintings, sculpture and ideas as my only weapons. ■

JOHN L. SILVA is the Senior Consultant for the National Museum of the Philippines.



# Kris, Brassware, and Baul

THE ARTS AND  
CRAFTS OF THE  
MARANAOS



TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **BOBBY TIMONERA**



When one talks about Maranao arts and crafts, one town in Lanao del Sur stands out.

The beautiful hand-made products, in fact, have made the coastal town of Tugaya famous. Tugaya artisans have been making for centuries everything the Maranaos are known for—kris swords and other blades, brassware, tribal drums, intricate wood carvings, and treasure chests called *baul*.

Different villages have different specialties—like Bubong for brassware, Sumbaga Rogong for the *baul*, Dilimbayan for tribal drums locally called the *debakan* or *dadabuan*, Raya for the kris and other edged weapons, yet another part of Raya for the scabbards.

Bobby Latiph, a native of Tugaya who showed me around his hometown, explains that their forefathers who went on hajj (pilgrimage) to Mecca, passing by various cities and countries, must have copied the beautiful items they saw during their long trip to the holy land during ancient times. Latiph himself did some okir carving for the *baul* during his child-

hood years as every boy at Sumbaga Rogong did.

So skilled are the Tugaya artisans that there's a joke going around about a resident complaining: "What's wrong with this government? They say it's bankrupt, no more money. But when we help them make money, they get mad at us." At least the metal variety, not the bills, when coins still had high purchasing power.

A visit to Tugaya, situated on a rolling terrain along the coast of Lake Lanao, is like a travel back in time. Artisans work with primitive equipment in makeshift workshops below their homes yet churn out products sought after







by collectors all over the world.

Like the working place of swordsmith Guzman Maliawao, already in his 70s, who heats his metals in a fireplace powered by manually pumping air through two bamboo bellows, then hammering the red hot metal into form. His specialty is making the *tabas*, sometimes called *panabas*, which

is mainly used on the farm, although it was sometimes also used as a combat weapon in olden days.

Yet another man was spotted working on smaller daggers with one whole piece of ivory tusk beside him, to be made part of the handle.

MacArthur Bassar, 50, says he comes from a generation of brassware makers. He learned the craft from his father, Matua, when he was 15, although he was already doing minor jobs in the workshop below their ancestral house in his pre-teen years. His father in turn assisted MacArthur's grandfather, Pauti.

"We've been doing this for centuries, even before the Americans and the Spaniards came," he says. Bassar claims they're lucky because of the red soil available only at Tala-tala beach, a short boat ride away. This soil they use as part of the mold, which he says could easily withstand the heat of furnace fire and molten metal.

In the village of Dilimbayan, wood carvers work on an entire trunk of mango or jackfruit to be made into tribal drums, some small for playing in festivals, some as tall as eight feet and a meter wide to be used outside a mosque to call the faithful to prayer.

Walking through the narrow roads of Tugaya during the usual working hours, one can hear the thumping sound of the hammer emanating from almost every household—either the men forging a kris blade or carving an okir design, or women decorating a *baul* with thousands of small diamond-shaped pieces cut from mother-of-pearl shells.

But while the Tugaya artisans are much more productive economically compared to their Maranao brethren in the other towns of Lanao del Sur, they could still perform better if only there's a stable supply of electricity in the area. Nasrodi Rachman, a maker of *baul* and other wood products, complains that he could not work in the evening, or when the sky is dim, as when I visited Tugaya one rainy day in July.

It is ironic that while the Maranaos are host to Lake Lanao, source of water for six hydroelectric dams along the Agus River that empties into Iligan Bay, their power supply is erratic, no thanks to a mismanaged electric cooperative in the province of Lanao del Sur. **N**



# Pain and Suffering

HAUNTING IMAGES FROM A  
TAUSUG ARTIST

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY **BOBBY TIMONERA**

**A**s a little child not even five years of age, witnessing the burning of Jolo must have been traumatic for Tausug painter Rameer Tawasil. It's hard to simply forget images from an incident that almost wiped out an entire town, of mothers wailing with babies in their arms, of people looking up the sky as fighter planes dropped their bombs, of houses and buildings and mosques burning up in flames.

His sister Mudzna, who was 11 years older, carried Rameer on her back as they ran for safety, dodging bombs and bullets. "I could see bullets whizzing by so low," recalls Rameer of the Feb. 7, 1974, burning that started at dawn. A Japanese boat that passed by the Jolo

pier brought Rameer and other members of the family safely to Zamboanga City as thousands of Joloanos left their homeland.

It is thus no coincidence that Rameer's most popular painting so far, and which he considers as his most significant, is the one aptly







titled “The Burning of Jolo.” In flaming red in a large 3x4-foot canvass, Rameer worked on the painting in 2003 on a grant from the National Commission on Culture and the Arts.

Although he was not the typical frontline activist in college—he was usually buried in the background silently doing portraits of Moro National Liberation Front chair Nur Misuari for Moro youth rallies in Zamboanga’s streets—his in-the-middle-of-the-war experience always brings him back to his roots.

While he drew beautiful landscapes (like the large cityscape he did that now hangs in the lobby of the Concepcions’ RFM Corp. headquarters) and pretty women (among them is “Mora Lisa,” a

portrait of a crush years ago) in the early years of his career as a professional painter, many of his recent works now depict the suffering and struggle of his people.

His “Peace Vendor” represents the Mindanaoans’ quest for peace and shows a fish vendor and her child surrounded by automatic rifles (an M-16 and an AK-47) with a tied dove instead of fish on the nigo atop her head. His “Parang Sabil,” also known as the “*juramentado*” during the Spanish and American times, shows the Moros’ frenzied fight against foreign invaders, an act considered by Moros as the height of martyrdom.

Among the few prolific contemporary Tausug painters, Rameer has some more ideas on his mind, some of which are already in his sketchbook waiting to be rendered on canvass. These include the battle of Bud Bagsak, wherein hundreds of Tausug warriors, with nothing but kris swords in hand, were killed by the more powerful machine guns and cannons of the Americans; a critique of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM); the deportation of Filipinos from Sabah, which is said to be once part of the Sultanate of Sulu; and a few more.

In his studio in his elder sister’s house in Zamboanga City, Rameer is now working on a painting of women musicians, a tribute to elder relatives known for their mastery of native instruments. But amidst the pile of canvasses, sketchbooks, easels, oil paint tubes and paintbrushes in his studio is one painting that remains unfinished to this day, and will remain so in the years to come—a portrait of *kababayan* Nur Misuari.

“I used to have a high regard for him, for what he had done for the Moro people. But I got disillusioned since he ran for ARMM [governor], and what he did afterwards,” said Rameer.

There’s the usual moon-and-crescent and a kris sword, symbols of the Moro struggle, both already colored amidst a red background. But the smiling Misuari donning a kopiah remains a faint pencil sketch, never to come to life in full colors. ■

RAMEER TAWASIL can be reached by e-mail: [tawasil\\_brownmoroartist@yahoo.com](mailto:tawasil_brownmoroartist@yahoo.com)





# Return to Eden

THE PARADISE THAT IS DAVAO

**G**iven its paradise-like, mostly untouched mountains and beaches, Southern Philippines would naturally be big on ecotourism. Its chance to maximize the moneymaking potential of its natural beauty came in August, when Myanmar, for political reasons, backed out as host of this year's ASEAN Tourism Forum.

Mindanao decided to turn it into the island's advantage. Davao City will be the site of the January 13 to 21 gathering. The largest city in the world in terms of land area, Davao expects to benefit two ways from the attention it will get from tourism promoters and enthusiasts in the region. The city has its own tourism gems to promote, while travelers will have to land and stay in Davao on their way to interesting spots in neighboring provinces.

So what do you visit in Davao? Pearl Farm? Mt. Apo Park? The already popular attractions are still good. But the new favorites could be better. We particularly recommend two that belong to the Ayalas of Davao: the Eden Nature Park and The Island Buenavista.

## 'RETURN TO EDEN'

This mountain resort is a story of two attempts at "re-creation": bringing to life a sanctuary that was wasting away, and in the process replicating the original biblical paradise.

In the early 1970s, anti-Marcos lawyer and business Jesus "Chito" Ayala bought a total of 80 hectares on the upper slopes of Mt. Talomo, a dormant volcano with Mt. Apo behind it. The area was logged out and frequented by communist guerillas. But at 2,630 feet above sea level, it also had a grand view of the city proper, the Davao Gulf, and Samal islands.

In the next three decades, the area was planted to pine trees, fruit trees, flowers, and organic vegetables. It started a wildlife conservation program, now sheltering deer, monkeys, and Indian

the resort.) There are three kinds of visits you can make at Eden Nature Park. You can go there for brief recreational activities: have a guided shuttle tour within the park (P50 each person), go fishing (P50, and pay for the tilapia you can catch), and swimming (P50 for kids, P75 for adults). The bean-shaped pool is located in the highest point of the park.

There are whole-day package tours, the most popular of which is the one that includes buffet lunch in the café that reminds you of the one they had in *Jurassic Park* (P180 per child, P330 per



peacocks. The rebels were given parcels of land in the barangays leading to the park where they could build houses and live a life away from armed struggle. In what is now called Barangay Eden (outside the property), the resort owner built a school, where the student population has grown from 42 to about 1,000.

In 1997, the park opened to the public as a place for adventure and for communing with nature. (Some of the ex-rebels' children and grandchildren are working in

adult). On weekdays, there are eco-tours for students (minimum of 30 students per group) at discounted prices.

The most exciting package is where families or groups can sleep over in cottages or villas—complete with a receiving area, dining area, kitchen, cooking and dining ware, refrigerator, TV, toilet and bath with hot and cold shower. During the day, the family can enjoy (in addition to the

feature of the day tours) horseback riding, the hiking trails, the jogging lane, the bird walk, and the ecumenical prayer garden, among other interesting spots.

The accommodation fees range from P5,760 per night (cottage with 10 occupants) to P7,200 per night (log cabin with 12 occupants). Standard rooms and suites, which can accommodate two to four persons, can be rented







**NIGHT AND DAY:** Eden Resort and Davao's nightlife



## MEN ON AN ISLAND

There's an islet off Davao that you can own—for a day—for only US\$200 per person. The deal, however, is you will have to rent it with at least nine other relatives, friends, or officemates. Despite the expanse of the property, it doesn't accommodate more than one group at a time. Exclusivity, in addition to the amazing scenery, is the best offer that The Island Buenavista has. So exclusive, in fact, that you won't see the resort's staff roaming around unless you ring for them.

While at the resort, families bond, and companies do team-building exercises through swimming, sailing, diving, or just taking in the serene surroundings. They stay in well-furnished cottages, and complete meals for them are included in the daily rates.

If you can afford to pay a thousand dollars for a luxury hotel room that offers only the amenities of city living, twice that amount to have an island all to yourselves is definitely a great bargain—and a more rewarding hideaway.

—Miriam Grace A. Go

for P1,260 to P5,000.

There's a campsite that looks very much like Camp Walden in *Parent Trap*. Outside the rented halls, there's an open area where kids (and parents) can put up their tents. There's a so-called Indiana Jones trail to complete the outdoor experience. The rates range from P4,000 to P8,000 per campsite per night, accommodating 12 to 70 campers.

Companies and government

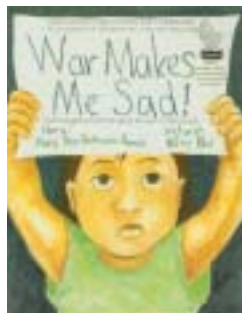
offices have held workshops and conferences in Eden's Seminar Village, which has dormitories and a separate cafeteria for participants. There are two small gardens that are ideal for wedding ceremonies and other big gatherings. The amphitheater is particularly suited for a wedding because it's flanked by a 100-seater, "floating" dining area on one side, and a honeymoon suite on the other.

Barely an hour from Davao City proper, Eden Nature Park is a testament to "how man can re-create nature and rebuild a lost environ-

ment," as their promo line goes. The effort to keep nature undisturbed in this resort is inspired by Betsy Holland Gehman's words, which the resort staff seem to be taking to heart: "It may well be that every making of a garden is an attempt to return to Eden. It even may be that every garden is an Eden in itself."

By the way, as in the original garden in the Bible, picking of fruits and flowers is not allowed at Davao City's Eden.





## MY MUSLIM FRIEND

(Illustrations by Joanne de Leon)

## WAR MAKES ME SAD

(The Thoughts of a Child About the War in Mindanao)

(Illustrations by Biboy Blu)

Stories by Mary Ann

Ordinario-Floresta

Published by ABC Educational Development Center

PERIODICALLY, I MAKE THE ROUNDS of bookstores to pick up locally published storybooks for my children, enough to entertain them for maybe the next three to four months. In one of those bulk-buying episodes, I got to read two interesting titles: *My Muslim Friend* and *War Makes Me Sad*, both written by Mary Ann Ordinario-Floresta. The first one warmed my heart, the other tugged at it.

*My Muslim Friend* is autobiographical, a narration of how the author, as a young Ilocano girl living in Mindanao, developed a friendship with Jamella, a Muslim. It's a friendship that lasts to this day, with Mary Ann based in Kidapawan City and Jamella in Jolo.

How was that friendship strengthened over the years? The author tells us by just recounting the everyday activities she and her friend shared. They became friends because they were seatmates in class. Since then they would go to school and home together. They did their homework together, joined the Girl Scouts together, brought each other *merienda* on weekends, taught one to speak the other's dialect, played the *kulintang* (a Maranao musical instrument) and ate *saluyot* and *bagoong* (staple of Ilocano meals) together.

Girl thing, you'll probably say. But perhaps more. The constant togetherness of those girls in their formative years could not have gone on if their families didn't allow it; if their families had their bi-

ases against people with different cultures, languages, and religious beliefs. Mary Ann and Jamella were blessed to have families that were blind to stereotypes or to any lines supposedly separating Christians and Muslims.

The story's most powerful illustrations of this cultural and religious tolerance are the narration about how the girls occasionally dined at each other's house, and how they accompanied each other to their places of worship.

"How I loved the way her Mom prepared beef steak! My Mom always cooked a special dish for her. She used a dif-

ferent plate, a different serving spoon to make sure pork was not included in her meal. But she never complained or never felt pork was dirty because it was served on the table. And until now I admire her for that trait.

"I often visited our church and prayed to Jesus Christ. She just sat beside me and waited silently. We also visited their mosque. She told me how they worshiped Allah. I talked to her about the Bible and she explained to me the Qu'ran."

Mary Ann and Jamella have their own families now—and they stood as godmother to each other's child at baptism. "Believe it or not, we still have something in common," the author concludes. "As a pediatrician, she treats sick children. I also write books for children. Isn't that wonderful?"

Ms. Floresta's other book is about the armed conflict in Mindanao, narrated from the point of view of an unnamed girl, who is wondering what is this thing they call war and if some people can do something to make it end. All she knows, the girl says, is that her family has to leave their hut and her doll and books "so we can be far away from the explosions," and then sleep with strangers in packed classrooms without mat, blanket, nor mosquito net.

"Sometimes, Mother shakes me and I hear her say, 'Wake up my child, you are having a nightmare.' And I tell her why. I dreamed of a huge gun. It was chasing me. I had run fast so I can hide."

At some points in the story, I

almost cried. The author so successfully hides her voice in the narration (except for two phrases or sentences that I think sounded "adult") that the reader can actually imagine it is a frightened, helpless little girl talking.

"I remembered my friend Kahlil, who lost his arms. They say, 'the war took it.' Will he still go to school? How can he use his pencil and crayons again? I don't understand.

"We can't change our clothes and we don't have any belongings. We can't even take a bath because there is no water. Maybe that is why so many of us get sick. I even saw a mother, she gave birth but her baby did not move. They said that there was no doctor to take care of her."

Reading *War Makes Me Sad*, you wouldn't need any thick academic paper,

not even experts' com-

mentaries in NEWSBREAK, to best understand how war destroys lives. Children's lives.

"What scares me even more is the thought that Father, Mother, Toto or Nene might be gone one day. What if they get sick? That is why I hold tightly onto my mother's skirt. I am afraid that I might be lost and left alone." Imagine if it were *your* child.

—Miriam Grace A. Go

## GOOD MUSLIM, BAD MUSLIM:

America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror

By Mahmood

Mamdani

Published in the

Philippines by

Anvil Publishing Inc.



SINCE THE TRAGIC AT-

tacks of 9/11 and the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, terms like "Islamic terrorism," "jihad," and "Muslim fundamentalists" have been regularly splashed across newspapers and heard on TV programs. Yet very few people are aware of the subtle nuances in definitions of jihad or realize that fundamentalism was originally a term applied to Christianity. How many of us consider differentiating between Islam as a religion and Islam as a political movement?

Mahmood Mamdani's book *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* examines the current trend of oversimplifying Islam that ignores the various strands within it (radical or

conservative, nationalist goals, and ideologies). Mamdani, a respected political scientist and anthropologist (also a key academic figure at Columbia University) wrote the book as a response to misleading assumptions post 9/11 that the rise of terrorism could be explained away as culture-based clash of civilizations between the Western and the Muslim world. In his opening acknowledgements, Mamdani describes the book as an attempt to "understand the modern tendency to politicize culture and in that context, the forging of political Islam and political terror during the Cold War." The title refers to the Western idea of "bad" Muslims as terrorists and fundamentalists in contrast to secular, pro-American policy "good" Muslims.

*Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* delves deep into history, across continents and cultures, to discuss American foreign policy before and after the September 11 attacks. It is written in a clear, engaging style. The breadth of research is astounding—covering Cold War politics, covert wars, and a vast array of political movements from South America, Indochina, and Africa.

Mamdani raises difficult questions about the motives of major players such as the US and reminds us that the use of terrorism is not unique to Islam. The rich history lesson on foreign policy at work and conflict strategies sets the stage for a thorough investigation of the forces at work in Afghanistan before

and after 9/11. After all, American involvement in Afghanistan began long before the current world debate on "political Islam." However, the international community appears to have a remarkably short memory of it.

*Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* is a provocative read, providing the missing historical context so crucial to deepening our understanding of present conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the shadowy Al-Qaeda network. —Camille Nivera

The books are available at National Bookstore and other bookshops in Metro Manila and major cities nationwide





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# Into the Abyss

ONE SURVEY IN THE REPORT SUGGESTS HOW BRITTLE CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS REMAIN

BY PATRICIO N. ABINALES

**T**he long and short of the 2005 edition of the *Philippine Human Development Report* is that we, as a nation, are in a mess. This state of disorder has kept the embers of a communist insurgency alive, long after China has transformed Mao Tse-Tung into a commercial icon. In the Philippines, Maoism is alive and kicking thanks mainly to a deteriorating *cacique* democracy. The Red Pope (a wonderful title conjured by the public intellectual Manuel Quezon III to refer to the communist *capo* Jose Ma. Sison) will see no need to amend the outdated revolutionary analyses he wrote in the late 1960s to conform to the times, when the system is self-destructing in its own accord.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Bosnia and East Timor, and with the current struggles in southern Thailand, western China and Tibet, separatism remains an attractive option for those "minorities" being excluded and oppressed by the nation-states that govern them. Separatism's success however appears contingent on the extent to which rebels are able to convince other nations to support substantially their project. Bosnia and East Timor succeeded because of the tremendous pressures (including the use of force) brought upon Serbia and Indonesia by the Western countries. No other separatist movement has shown any success going at it alone. Not even our very own Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Yet, the latter, particularly the MILF, is still there: fully armed, popular, and committed in principle to a separate Bangsamoro Republic in Mindanao.

Rebellion's resilience has its roots in widespread urban and rural poverty, an eternally violent political and social landscape, and the subsequent breakdown of the social and cultural fabric of many communities affected by these internal wars. What the team of social scientists that crafted this report wants to impress on us is that we have reached a crisis point in our economic and politi-

cal life. Consider the report's major findings:

Ninety-one percent of Philippine provinces are now war zones (and of the 21 provinces where anti-state armed groups are most active, 15 are in Mindanao). The cost has been devastating: from 1975 (when the MNLF war exploded in Mindanao and the Armed Forces of the Philippines or AFP began its insurgency operations against the fledgling Communist Party of the Philippines) to 2002 (with the skirmishes between the AFP and the MILF and the increasing regularity of New People's Army or NPA encounters with government troops), between P5 billion to P10 billion lost annually in terms of human productivity, lost investments, and destroyed industrial and related facilities.

The second part of the study further details this decline with brief histories of the origins, cause, and impact of Muslim separatism and the CPP-NPA, and an overview of the state of human development, gender equality and poverty in the Philippines. It is the last section that is most disturbing as one set of statistics after another show how serious the situation has become, especially for the Mindanao provinces.

Continuous warfare has added to the woes of an already widely impoverished Philippine countryside. While on their own, they may

not cause people to revolt, together they are a potent combination that pushes people the join the NPA or support the MILF.

## WORRISOME

The report reconfirms conclusions learned from rebellions in other countries, i.e., that insurgency and separatism can only be solved if incomes—particularly in the countryside—rise. It also alerts us once again that while the instigators of rebellions are almost always representatives of the middle classes and not the poor, it is when they coalesce that the probability of revolutionary success goes up considerably. We may be witnessing the re-emergence of this inter-class collaboration, as more poor peasants join hands with alienated students to boost the NPA.

One chapter is Muslim-specific and is worrisome because it shows that a considerable number of Filipinos are still prejudiced, bigoted, and mistrustful of Muslims. The survey results suggest how brittle Christian-Muslim relations remain and all one needs is another incident like the Jabidah Massacre for the inter-religious wars of the 1970s to return to southwestern Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago. It also explains

## Philippine Human Development Report 2005

Human Development Network, 2005  
Manila, 151 pp.

why the MILF and the MNLF are still pretty much in the minds of many Muslims.

In short, our most important attribute as a nation

in late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century Philippines is our perpetual immersion in a state of war. We have never experienced peace on a nationwide and lasting basis since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Americans consolidated their rule over the entire archipelago. But this too proved short-lived.

Quezon's Commonwealth was challenged by Sakdalistas and Komunistas, with the latter continuing their struggle into the early years of the Republic. The defeat of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas by Ramon Magsaysay and the CIA ushered a decade and a half of stability, but by the time of Ferdinand Marcos's second term, communism had returned,







ALEX BALUNUT

this time joined by Muslim separatism. Since then, the political violence engendered by these ideological wars has not abated.

What this well-written summary of a series of commissioned studies (available on the Web) is warning us is that unless something drastic is done to the plight of the poor, we've more or less cemented our own road to perdition. The communists need not prepare the Maquis for a shift to battalion formation and ready it for the strategic offensive that will lead them to Malacañang *a la* the Vietnamese in 1975. Rebuilding its Camp Abubakar fortress to prepare for the next major confrontation with the AFP is no longer a priority for the MILF. The Red Pope and Al Haj Murad Ebrahim just have to sit back and watch the system collapse from the sheer weight of its corruption, inefficiency, and tyranny.

#### WHAT TO DO?

The dire situation, however, is no cause for losing one's op-

should become "an integral part of the mainstream political agenda."

#### WHERE'S THE ELITE?

Its breadth and substance notwithstanding, the study is puzzling for a number of elisions. Our economic elites are handled with kid's gloves, as if they never had a hand in the poverty of the nation. There are some nasty asides against unscrupulous politicians, but nothing else beyond that. In fact our business elites and Manila's 400 are exempted from the critique; they are absolved from being equally responsible for the current state.

One was hoping that the writers devote the same enthusiasm in estimating and projecting how much capital has left the country as fearful elites stock up on their resources abroad. There is no breakdown on tax evasion and who the evaders are on a per-province basis; neither is there any table that shows income differences per province.

be no different from their *trapo* colleagues and rivals.

The formers' exclusion also indirectly helps perpetuate the myth of a hundred-year "Moro struggle," which has become one of the most enduring invented traditions of southern Philippine history. Muslim communities did resist the central state, but the resistance was never a consistent and continuous one. There were, in fact, more episodes of collaboration with Manila, led by their elites who also sold them out. (As a side issue, the reports also minimizes fierce intra-ethnic differences within the *umma*, which results among other things, in a misplaced hope that the MILF and MNLF would unite and push for a common agenda for negotiations)

#### ECOLOGY MATTERS

A final note: resolving our country's internal wars has become more urgent in the light of our rapidly depleting natural resources. Environmentalists have warned time and again that the

## A CONSIDERABLE NUMBER OF FILIPINOS ARE STILL PREJUDICED, BIGOTED, AND MISTRUSTFUL OF MUSLIMS

timism. The study's other strong point is that its motherhood-and-apple-pie policy aspirations are also balanced by realistic proposals.

The study reiterates the need to implement fundamental reforms in the electoral process, governance, and economic development, while proposing a number of attainable goals—a three-track solution to end the Moro rebellion, legitimizing the pursuit of peace via legislation, and creating a "national constituency for peace" by tapping civil society groups, a better-informed media, and a forward-looking business sector.

The authors finished the report amidst demands for Charter change and saw an opportunity to push for making peace a vital part of this current national debate. But the prerequisite is public involvement; Filipinos must take up actively "the cause of peace and the resolution of armed conflicts [and place them] in the national discourse" so that it would be impossible for the politicians to ignore them. These issues then

One is left wondering, if indeed "history matters," how a history of income disparity will look like and where we would we put our *burgis*. Did they really earn that much wealth honestly?

This absence of class from the study inevitably leads the authors to de-emphasize the powers of the rich. Let us take the case of Muslim Mindanao. Yes, the Muslim provinces are the poorest in the country, but the penury has not infected its traditional and modern leaders; true, the incidence of poverty is high in these areas, but in Magindanao, Sulu, and Lanao also are found some of Mindanao's richest families.

Divisions arising from class and status in the *umma* are ignored and Muslim politicians (including ex-MNLF rebels) are excused from being also responsible for the corruption and inefficiencies of Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. In fact, the study tiptoes around this problem. It would not look good if former rebels, who continue to spout our rhetoric about the historicity of the "Moro struggle," are found out to

breakdown of our eco-system has reached crisis proportions. There will be no winners here. Peace advocates in the government and their civil society and business allies may succeed in getting everyone on board. The next step may prove to be more difficult: on what resources will this "national constituency for peace" stand?

Even if the Red Pope's hordes capture Malacañang or Murad's mujahideen manage to break Mindanao away from the republic, these socialist and Islamic republics will have very little to rebuild their war-torn societies with. There will no more forests, food-producing regions will have been contaminated and poisoned, and minerals exhausted.

As a collaborative work of political scientists, sociologists and economists, the report is understandably biased in its focus. Perhaps in the next edition, this exceptional team will invite environmentalists into the conversation and thus come up with a more comprehensive account of how we can stop our march into the abyss. **N**

# The First Step to Peace

THERE'S QUIET PROGRESS ON AN AGREEMENT WITH THE MILF

BY BENEDICTO BACANI and DAVID TIMBERMAN

**W**hile the attention of diplomats and donors has been focused on supporting peace processes in tsunami-hit conflict zones in Indonesia and Sri Lanka, there has been quiet progress toward ending the Muslim separatist insurgency on the island of Mindanao. Philippine Muslims, also known as Moros, have become a disadvantaged minority in the very region they consider to be their centuries-old "homeland." Moro aspirations for self-determination have been championed by two armed groups: the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which made peace with Manila in 1996, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which continues to have around 13,000 armed regulars.

Both the government and the MILF are expressing optimism that a peace accord will be reached, perhaps as soon as early next year. An agreement will be a major step toward ending the 25-year old insurgency, which the Moros consider part of their long history of struggle against colonialism and subjugation. But bringing lasting peace to Mindanao will depend even more on how the agreement is implemented and by the actions of the major players—including the international community—long after the agreement is signed.

Peace in Mindanao is critical for reviving the island's potential as an engine for agribusiness-oriented economic growth and development. A peace agreement will help end the violence and insecurity that have plagued Western Mindanao for decades. And in doing these things, an agreement also will help remedy the socioeconomic conditions that have made Muslim Mindanao a fertile ground for terrorist groups like Jemaah Islamiyah and the Abu Sayyaf Group.

There are tangible reasons for optimism regarding an agreement: Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, the embattled president, needs a "success" to bolster her presidency, both domestically and internationally. At the same time, Al

Haj Murad and other moderate leaders of the MILF need to show that they can get more from striking a deal with Manila than from fighting with it. With the help of Malaysian facilitation, there have been nine rounds of exploratory talks between the government

and the MILF. Meanwhile, on the ground in Mindanao, an internationally-monitored ceasefire has held for two years.

The details of the prospective agreement have been closely guarded, but it appears progress is being made. The MILF's desire to have greater control over development resources has been addressed by the creation of a Bangsamoro Development Agency. Both sides claim that significant progress has been made toward creating a mechanism to give Muslims greater control over land and resources in their "homeland." And an apparently credible recent report in the Philippine press stated that both sides are considering a significant revamping of the existing entity for autonomous governance, the highly flawed Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao or ARMM. Riddled with charges of corrup-

tion and inefficiency, the MNLF-led ARMM is widely perceived as having failed to improve the plight of the Moros. It's now the MILF's turn to negotiate with Manila, and it seeks genuine rather than token self-determination for the Moro people.

But the agreement is far from being a done deal, and the environment is fluid and unstable. At the

national level, politics has become highly polarized and the President appears most concerned with preserving her authority. In Mindanao, the MILF leadership is vulnerable to splitting, and the MNLF has essentially fragmented. If once-influential MNLF leaders are further marginalized, some of these MNLF fragments could become militant once again.

There are other risks as well. First, US-supported efforts by the Armed Forces of the Philippines

foreign donors and the private sector. Second, implementing two of the central elements of an agreement—establishing a new arrangement for autonomous governance and strengthening Muslim control of "ancestral" land and natural resources—will be complex and highly controversial. Finally, implementation of many provisions of the

agreement will require timely

national legislation and, most likely, changes to the Constitution. As such, peace in Mindanao could once again become a casualty of national politics.

The prospects for sustainable peace in Mindanao will be determined by the extent to which "four C's" are present. The first is the willingness of parties to *compromise*, particularly with regard to the extent of autonomy and the assertion of ancestral domain claims. The second is a willing-

## COMMENTARY

### THE EMBATTLED PRESIDENT ARROYO NEEDS A "SUCCESS" TO BOLSTER HER PRESIDENCY, DOMESTICALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY

(AFP) to eradicate terrorist groups run the risk of causing accidental armed encounters between the AFP and the MILF. Second, most donors haven't been willing to provide development assistance to the MILF until an agreement is signed. As a result, the MILF has only limited capacity to deal with complex peacetime challenges of development and governance. Finally, while secrecy has allowed the peace talks to progress, it also will make it harder to build support in Congress and across Mindanao for passage and implementation of the agreement.

Looking longer term, the successful implementation of an agreement will require overcoming a variety of challenges. First, the debt-laden national government is unlikely to be a source of major funding to support peace. Any hoped-for "peace dividend" will have to come primarily from

ness to be *creative*, particularly when addressing issues of sovereignty, autonomy and constitutional change. The third is a long-term *commitment* to implementing an agreement—not just by the government, MILF and AFP, but also by political, religious and business leaders in Manila and Mindanao, and by the international community. And finally, there needs to be the *capacity* in the government and among the principal groups in Mindanao to translate the commitment to peace into reality. ■

BENEDICTO BACANI is executive director of the Institute for Autonomy and Governance, a think tank based in Cotabato City and David Timberman is based in Jakarta where he consults and writes on governance issues in Asia.



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